

EXPOSITORY PREACHING AND THE UNITED METHODIST LAY SPEAKER

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BY
ROBERT T. MILSOM

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ABSTRACT

The United Methodist Church is reclaiming its historical reliance upon utilizing laypersons in the preaching role. In the United Methodist tradition, persons are trained for this ministry using resources offered by the denomination, in class groups offered regularly on a regional basis. However, the current training materials offer scant instruction on the methodology of exegesis and sermon construction. This project provides a replacement text for the Advanced Lay Speaking Course on Preaching currently offered by the denomination. This new resource will be in the format of a workbook/handbook, which will govern the process of sermon construction. The development of this handbook is driven by the assertion of this thesis that:

1. The basic principles of expository (or Big Idea) preaching can be successfully taught to laypersons.
2. An exegetical process that is “funneled” into the specific genres of the Bible will increase the course’s efficiency.

Chapter One: The Problem and Its Setting -- The Role and Predicament of the United Methodist Lay Speaker

The Problem Stated:

In the United Methodist Church, Lay Speakers are precious. Their presence greatly enhances the ability of the local church to build a growing, effective ministry. Below are just a few of the vital roles they fulfill:

1. Lay Speakers serve as worship leaders and preachers in the event of a pastor's absence, illness, or invitation.
2. Lay Speakers often accrue additional training and competency in other areas of ministry, such as small group leadership, administration, visitation, evangelism, and prayer.
3. Lay Speakers commonly initiate and lead new ministry programs in the areas of their interest and training.
4. Lay Speakers may, after additional evaluation, be invited to serve as Certified Lay Ministers. This is a non-sacramental role, yet one that encompasses most of the aspects of the pastoral ministry.
5. Lay Speakers, through their heightened activity and intentional focus, often multiply the pastoral presence of a local church, enabling both spiritual and numeric growth.
6. The Lay Speaking ministry often becomes an opportunity for one sensing a call to pastoral ministry to gain experience and test their vocation.

Yet, despite their great value, Methodist Lay Speakers are often frustrated in their ministry. Many go inactive, or withdraw. The most common reasons for this sad turnover are improper training, and improper utilization. The mammoth task of changing perceptions and practices among church leadership in order facilitate greater involvement of Lay Speakers is an issue for another project. But the training of Lay Speakers, particularly in the area of preaching, can and must be improved.

The greatest flaw in the current Lay Speaker training program is the paucity of focus and resources on sermon construction. Very little of the current preaching course is dedicated to the process of exegeting a biblical text, discerning its idea, and developing it into a message. What little is gleaned during the hurried minutes of class time will not translate into a reliable, step-by-step approach when the Lay Speaker is invited to preach, perhaps months or even years later. This leaves them up the sermonic creek without a paddle. With such a recipe for frustration, many gifted and precious Lay Speakers follow the path of any volunteer who feels unprepared or unsupported. They quit.

United Methodist Lay Speakers need a tool they can use to take them through the process of sermon preparation once the phone has rung and they hear the all too familiar, “I know this is short notice, but can you preach this Sunday?”

The Goal of this Project:

This project will develop a Lay Speaking manual, which may be used as a supplement or replacement for the existing textbooks in the Advanced Lay Speaking course. This manual will serve as a teaching tool during the course, and also as a handbook to guide the Lay Speaker during the preparation of additional sermons after the course is completed. The steps covered in the manual will include:

1. Text selection and study tools.
2. Defining the text as a unit.
3. Determination of the text's idea, enabled by methods specific to the text's genre.
4. Crafting the text's idea into a well-written homiletic idea.
5. Development of the idea into a sermon form.
6. Supportive material and illustrations.
7. Delivery and presentation.

During the preparation of this project, I will rely upon frequent and long-term conversation with the active Lay Speakers in my region. A survey of the needs and entry skills of Lay Speakers will be conducted. Sensitivity must be shown for the broad range of ages and academic achievement among the participants. A deliberate effort will be made to convert complex, graduate-level material into a resource that is engaging to read, and encouraging to the user.

Upon completion of the course and workbook materials, the content will be taught in a small-group class setting to Advanced Lay Speaker candidates. The courses will follow the six-session, 1½-hour format currently employed by the District Committee of Lay Speaking for its training events. The participants will be taught the fundamental principle of the Idea as a meaningful connection, a “distillation of life.” (Robinson, Biblical Preaching, page 38) This concentration will dominate at least one-third of all class time. The middle two sessions will focus on exposition, the developmental questions, and sermon form. During the third session, the students will be required to select a passage from a prescribed list of texts, and prepare a biblical sermon, using the workbook chapters provided. The final two sessions of the class will be devoted to the presentation, evaluation, and improvement of each student’s sermon. During evaluation and review, particular attention will be given to the connections between the genre of the Scripture passage and the composition of the sermon. The final 30 minutes of the last class session shall be devoted to mutual encouragement, and course feedback.

The Setting of the Project:

This project is directed toward the improvement of the Lay Speaker Training program in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, which encompasses southern New York State and western Connecticut. This Conference contains over 400 churches, with a combined membership of approximately 123,000. The majority of churches are composed of English-speaking, Caucasian members. About 35 of the churches in the Conference are considered ethnic ministries: Hispanic, Korean, African-

American, Haitian, and Ghanaian. Some churches, particularly the Korean congregations, offer substitute training courses in their own language and culture. Though training opportunities are open to all churches, driving distance requires that several classes are offered concurrently in convenient locations. All participants in the formation and trial teaching of this project are from the Hudson Valley region in lower New York State. The region contains three urban areas, a commuter crescent of affluent suburbs, and a wide arc of rural settings. More than half the churches in the region care are considered small churches, with under 100 in weekly attendance. Participants in this region's Lay Speaker training program are typically adults aged 40 and up. Most are Anglo-American, with a few African-American members.

This area, though influenced by cultural conditions of the Northeast, is representative of the United Methodist Church across America. It is my hope that the materials created through this project may be submitted for publication by the General Board of Discipleship as a supplement to the Advanced Course in Preaching. Since Lay Speakers have to take additional courses to keep their status active, this project may also be applied to the creation of an additional Advance Course that specifically focuses on Big Idea preaching.

At the time of the project, I am presently the co-coordinator and an instructor for the Lay Speaker training program mentioned above.. I also serve as a clergy member of the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, the evaluative body responsible for reviewing candidates for service as a Certified Lay Minister.

The Importance of the Project:

Lay Speakers are too precious an asset to the United Methodist Church to leave unprepared and unsupported. Persons responsible for Lay Speaker training are recognizing the denomination-wide need to develop new and more effective program resource. Though Lay Speaking has never been abandoned by the United Methodist Church throughout the course of its history, recent developments have created a quickening in the need to identify and equip effective Lay Speakers. Oddly, the demand comes on the heels of both patterns of growth and consequences of decline. In pockets of America, and globally as a diverse, flourishing church, there are once again situations where the number of worship and preaching opportunities outpaces the number of clergy available to lead them. The empowered, living Word is once again flowing from the lips of the laity, and in many corners of this world, congregations are once again relying on lay preaching as a substantial pillar of their own spiritual foundations. In other places across America, particularly in the Northeast and Western states, the United Methodist Church is experiencing heavy decline. Though there are wonderful exceptions, and new churches planted yearly, many established churches that long ago cocked an ear to hear the clip-clop of their circuit rider's approaching horse have dwindled to a few dozen faithful each Sunday. Several thousand out of United Methodism's roughly 37,000 remaining American churches share a pastor with one or several other parishes. In multi-charge situations, often the pastor can only be present every other Sunday. Lay Speakers are being trained and deployed to fill the gap. A pessimistic view would declare that this

is just a facet of terminal care; those who can offer little substance preaching to those who wouldn't receive it anyway...the helpless preaching to the hopeless.

The reminders of the Spirit's work in history (see Chapter 2, Section 3) and an honest look at the deep spiritual hunger amidst these challenging settings gives a different view. Perhaps it is time for the living Word to pour from the lips of Lay Speakers once again. The gift of prophetic preaching from the laity has been used by the Spirit in key ways in the past; it could certainly happen again, and it's time to consider if this may indeed be part of God's plan. The seeds of revival may already have been planted by God in the hearts of chosen laypersons, and it is the responsibility of those who are covenant leaders to be prepared to empower any and all means for renewal. Current conditions certainly lead to the conclusion that it is time for those who have benefited from sound instruction to renew their efforts to train these volunteer preachers well. In part, the future of United Methodism will depend upon the effectiveness of its Lay Speaking program.

The task of providing effective training in homiletics for the Lay Speaker, who often must assume the enormous mantle of preaching the Word of God with little instruction, has grown even more complex. Today, preachers strive to connect the transforming message of the Bible to a people steeped in a deceptively secular and compartmentalized world. Because the relevance of the Bible is no longer assumed, "Thus saith the Lord" often elicits more cocked eyebrows than tears. Attention spans and perceived credibility for any who stand in or near a pulpit have shrunk dramatically. It could be argued that these are among the most difficult times, at least in America's history, to successfully

engage an audience with the truth of God's Word. The call is clear; all who preach to this generation must not only speak from an utter, prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit, but they must be sound in doctrine, instruction, and praxis. In short, those who preach *must* do so very, very well.

Yet it is not merely the obvious cultural need for effective preaching that demands a deeper look into the training of Lay Speakers. A close look into how Lay Speakers are involved today (and how that affects preaching instruction) is also revealing, and establishes the urgency for the development of effective instruction in preaching.

In recent years, the role of the Lay Speaker has been expanded to include a variety of forms of servant ministry. The Lay Speaker is a certified office within the United Methodist Church, and though preaching is the most common expression of that office, Lay Speakers can now also be trained to serve in worship leadership, caregiving/counsel, lay training, visitation and teaching. Most of these other areas are taught through additional courses. The training and involvement of Lay Speakers has become a highly regarded means of energizing local churches by increasing skilled lay participation in many facets of ministry. This diversification, though a good step, has the unintended consequence of directing additional educational opportunities to other areas than preaching. There is a danger of detracting from what was already a bare minimum in preaching instruction.

Where formal training fails, resources must prevail. And if one is left on his or her own to navigate the difficult terrain of proclaiming the Word of God, it is best to provide a well-marked map. A reliable, usable guidebook should take them through the process.

Oddly enough, seasoned pastors are more difficult to equip with such a resource than Lay Speakers. Clergy have developed their own habits, which are not easily set aside. They often preach in the manner they were taught in seminary; the five-step homily (introduction, exposition, interpretation, application, conclusion), the three-point thematic, or the running/rambling commentary.

Through the development of this resource package, this thesis will advance that the most effective method of preaching to today's substance and relevance-craving culture is expository preaching. Therefore, if Lay Speakers are to be given the best training possible within their time availability and educational backgrounds, they must be taught expository preaching. (For a full definition of expository preaching, please see the following chapter, section 2.) Once defined, the term "expository" will be left behind, and in the Project will bear a new name; Big Idea preaching. This will prevent preemptive judgments, since expository preaching has been burdened with undue baggage across the mainline tradition, often associated with windy, interminable explanations of the text itself, devoid of freshness and vividness. As the process emerges, the opposite will prove true. Expository (or Big Idea) preaching will serve to connect the Bible to life with integrity. It will also convey the spiritual authority and

power imbued in the Holy Bible, which can transform lives, and renew a church crying out to experience the wonder of a life transformed by grace.

Chapter Two: Theological Reflection on the Nature of Preaching, the Ministry of Expository Preaching, and Preaching through the Laity

Section 1: A Theological Definition of Preaching.

The entire world of homiletics revolves around one central axiom: God is still speaking. Preaching is not just an earth-bound activity where the educated or enthusiastic still talk about God. *God* is still communicating. The deists, the monists, and the Unitarians may now sit down, for this axiom mandates a unique, transcendent Creator for whom communication and unity come together in the mysterious wonder of the Trinity; “Let us create...” (Genesis 1:26 NRSV) In this passage, God the eternal three-but-one is revealed to us as interactive. The very fact we *have* such a revelation already demands such a nature. God speaks, and even as he has spoken creation into being, he also speaks to and through his creation. (Psalm 19:1,2; Romans 1:20) As human beings, part of the created order, yet with individual conscience, memory and choice, we are made to be in a living relationship with God. Despite the sin-shattered brokenness of this world, God still speaks. However, the key to understanding the nature of God’s communication is to indelibly tie together God’s speaking with God’s action. In God’s saying, is God’s doing. The word is the work. Or, as Fred Craddock states it so beautifully, “Revelation is not simply about grace but is itself an act of grace” (Craddock 55).

In God’s calling of Abraham, God spoke into being a plan and process of salvation for the world, “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country...to the land that I will

show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3 NRSV) Our Holy Scripture chronicles God’s continued saving acts of speaking to and through his covenant people Israel. The Exodus and wilderness experience, the receiving of the Law, the worship of the tabernacle and temple, the collections of wisdom writings, and the strident voice of the prophets all rest on the premise that God is communicating to and through people. Whether the message was one of consolation or condemnation, God’s word and God’s work are deeply connected. Through God’s chosen vessel of Israel, God has spoken forth salvation to the world through his Son Jesus Christ, the saving word/saving work of God made flesh. Through this mighty, world-reversing act of salvation, the communicating, active nature of God the Three-in-One is revealed most fully. The Father sends, the Son is sent, and the Holy Spirit accomplishes and empowers the sending. All are God, all speak, all act. In the creation of the Church universal, the saving and transforming grace ordained by the Father, purchased by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit, is brought to humankind. Through this threefold act of salvation, we are restored to a new, eternal relationship with God. “For in him (Christ) the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth and in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross.” (Colossians 1;19,20 NRSV)

Through the commissioning of the disciples, and through them the establishment of the ongoing witness of the Church, Jesus instructed his Church to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and

teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19,20 NRSV) As the eternal, saving Word/work of God was given to the world in Christ, so also we are to participate in that saving, transforming act by proclaiming Christ crucified for the sin of the world and risen in glory. God still speaks, and in the redemption of Christ, enabled and applied by the Spirit, we are to proclaim as a church to ourselves and to the world the fullness of God’s word to this world. In the Spirit-governed consolidation of the scriptural canon, the unchanging, interrelated record of God’s acts of salvation are forever recorded and brought to the world for the Church throughout this age. In the mystery of the word and work as one, the saving message of the Bible is established, yet living; permanent, yet powerful. God’s inspired word...works. (2 Timothy 3:16,17) It is indispensable to preserving and proclaiming the vital core of faith that saves and disciples the Church of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the preaching of the word is a key component of the church on earth. As the homiletic master Donald Demaray puts it, “Preaching dawned as God’s ordained means of winning people to himself and nurturing them in the faith.” (Demaray 36)

Section 2: A Literary and Theological Definition of Expository Preaching.

It is imperative that a clear definition of expository preaching is advanced at this point, for it shall highlight the very means by which the powerful, word/work aspect of the Scriptures is preserved and brought afresh to an ever-changing world. Not only will it

qualify and focus the central method at the heart of this project, but it also shall serve to *disqualify* a wide realm of potential material that would only confuse or contradict the very method this project will strive to make clear. Not all that is declared to be expository preaching reconciles with the definition below. The resources selected for this project and those recommended for further study will be considered based both on their overall usefulness and the extent which they relate to the essence of the following supreme definition of expository preaching offered by Haddon Robinson:

“Expository preaching is a communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.” (Robinson 20)

This definition immediately overrides a host of misperceptions about what constitutes expository preaching. Many automatically associate this style of preaching with a long, information-heavy description of a passage, sort of a 45-minute running commentary, or catchy alliterated lists that proclaim lessons extracted from a portion of Scripture.

However, as one unpacks this definition, a clearer framework emerges.

First, expository preaching communicates a biblical concept. This writer believes that the strongest term in the definition is this one tiny article. A careful study of a biblical passage will reveal clear units of thought, which the original author was inspired to direct toward his original audience. Expository preaching demands unity, in order to express the one intentional and Spirit-empowered idea, often called the Big Idea, which emerges from one’s exegesis. Scattered observations and verse-by-verse explanation do not, therefore, constitute true expository preaching. One clear, change-inducing idea, derived

directly from the biblical author's intent, is what defines a true expository sermon, and what exemplifies Robinson's "bullet and not buckshot" (Robinson 33) criterion.

Second, the message itself not only emerges from a careful, contextual study of the author's thought within the passage (text to preacher), but then that essential development of the author's idea dramatically shapes how that idea is conveyed to the audience. In short, the inspired message of the text governs not only the discovery of the idea, but also governs the form by which it is brought to the audience. Both the text and audience are exegeted, and then brought together, but it is the text that determines the terms of that meeting. In allowing the text to drive both form and function of the message, the text's core authority and Spirit-driven power to transform lives are not diminished or diffused. One must understand and believe that the properly crafted and applied Idea of a unit of Scripture embodies the very power of the word/work of God to effect its intended change.

This power of the word of God to transform lives leads to a third aspect of expository preaching that must not be ignored. It always applies to the lives of the listeners. Just as the biblical author wrote to instill a change in his audience, (if no change was needed, why bother writing?) the act of communication must seek to create a comparable change in the preacher's audience. Yet this change is not to be only a product of how skillful, emotional, or even convincing the preacher is. The actual application, touch, and change in the life of a hearer is a work of the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who inspired God's Word works incarnationally through the Word proclaimed to convict, redeem, and transform. The preacher, through fidelity to the word being preached, is but a participant

in the process. No Big Idea is lovingly lifted from the Scriptures in order for the congregation to behold how big the idea is. Some congregations may even be delighted with such preaching. They can appreciate how “deep” or “insightful” their pastor is, and can bask in the light of glory without ever having their own lives drawn into contact and accountability with the living Word. Dynamic application, which is a relevant life-change focus, is at the heart of expository preaching.

Section 3: Biblical and Theological Foundations in Justification of Lay Preaching.

The Old Testament is replete with examples of those called forth by God to gather and address the people of Israel and their surrounding nations. The roles and responses were varied, but the theological precedent remains true: God chooses to speak through one as a means to change many. Men and women were given vital roles in conveying messages from God. The New Testament depends on the premise that God has come in ultimate self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, the central pillar is the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen. This is the good news, the Gospel, and it calls for the hearer to respond in repentance and faith. Christian preaching embraces the proclamation of Christ himself. Since God has declared that Jesus is God’s ultimate Word, the Word and the person of Christ are inseparable. (Chapell 19) Every believer becomes a work in progress of the Holy Spirit, and a witness in progress *by* the Holy Spirit. It is a vibrant, bursting message that should never be restrained. In the very face of the Sanhedrin, Peter and John professed, “for we can not keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (Acts 4:20 NRSV) Through the obedient act of apostolic preaching, “the

gentiles also accepted the word of God.” (Acts 11:1 NRSV) It is evident, therefore, that a converted, baptized believer in Christ is called to broadly proclaim the wonderful, saving works of God. (Parachini 22) Every true Christian is by biblical definition a proclaimer and an evangelist in general conduct. (1 Peter 2:9) Yet it is also apparent that there is an additional, more particular “office” of preaching. The Apostle Paul recognized Timothy’s spiritual gift in preaching and encourages him to devote himself to it. (1 Timothy 4:13-16, 2 Timothy 4:2) The role of preaching emerges from and obedient application of gifts given as a work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life, to be used for the building of Christ’s Church: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:16 NRSV) The Holy Spirit provides and nurtures the gifts in individual believers, and the church corporate is necessary to recognize, employ, and benefit from those so gifted. This is the standard, yet this standard has obviously not always been lived to the fullest. Not all gifts are recognized and developed. Some are misused. Yet the Holy Spirit is still the supreme arbiter of the gifts themselves, and specifically for this project, the gift of preaching. Our history as the Church of Jesus Christ demands that we continually ask, “How well have we truly been obedient to the work, guidance, and gifting of the Holy Spirit?”

A brief tour of the ecumenical Church historic and people called Methodist tells the story.

Section 4: The Historical Work of God through the Preaching of the Lay Person.

Surely one of the brightest signs that God's Holy Spirit is on the move is the raising up of sincere believers, often from the most unlikely places, who will go forth to boldly and effectively proclaim the Word of God. However, the process of corporately discerning those so gifted and setting them apart for the preaching or teaching office is wildly diverse across the timeline and spectrum of ecumenical Christianity. Still, just as Scripture lays down some important theological underpinnings, so also church history reveals an emergent, experienced theology that embraces and carries forth the Biblical witness that God is indeed still speaking through both the ordained and the laity.

As the vast, manifold story of church history unfolds, it is important to note that three consistent and necessary factors combine to make one a preacher, and these four elements transcend both time and ordination. They apply equally to a monk in ancient Damascus as much as to a software designer from Detroit. In essence, the authority to preach is derived from:

1. One's personal, spiritual commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a baptized believer.
2. The inner work of the Holy Spirit in the gifting of preaching ability and illumination of God's call to use those gifts for the Kingdom.
3. Affirmation, formal or informal, from the church body or church authority.
4. Training and sound instruction. (Parachini 14-15, 23)

By the middle of the second century A.D., the office of bishop, presbyter, and deacon had become solidified and commonly accepted throughout the Christian Church. As the church now had a common power structure, but not a common scriptural canon, the sanction to preach flowed from the authority of the bishop. The task of maintaining the apostolic theology of the church coalesced in the office of the bishop. It is astonishing to realize the enormous control these early bishops commanded. In a letter to the Ephesians, circa 110 A.D., Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch, wrote, “For Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the will of the Father, just as the bishops, who have been appointed throughout the world, are the will of Jesus Christ...It is clear, then, that we must look upon the bishop as the Lord Himself.” (Jurgens 17-18) The Bishop ordained priests to bear his own authority to preach and perform the sacraments, and that authority could not be extended beyond them. In the year 453, Pope Leo I had written to Bishop Maximus with the command, “Apart from those who are priests of the Lord, no one may dare to claim for himself the right to teach and preach, whether he be monk or layman, or one who boasts a reputation for some learning.” (Skudarek 30) In the long process of consolidating theology against heresy and episcopal power against fragmentation, the act of preaching by those who had not been ordained and deployed by the bishop dried up until, by the end of the fifth century, it ceased to officially exist for the next six hundred years. (Parachini 9)

One brief, pre-Reformation resurgence of lay preaching did occur around the 11th and 12th centuries in the form of preaching bands. Though they still contained many clergy necessary to perform the sacrament of penance, these bands addressed the deplorable

spiritual state of the Catholic Church, calling the masses to repentance from immorality and heresy. Orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans were founded around this reversal from the cloisters to the marketplace. Though the doors to lay involvement in preaching were soon closed, a long-dormant association had been recovered that connected the power to preach with a zealous apostolic lifestyle, rather than ordination. (Parachini 15) The Council of Trent (1545-1563) has to this day snuffed the last embers of full preaching rights for laity within the Roman Catholic Church, but they did so even while the wildfires of the Reformation were already burning throughout Europe. Today, through the commissioned ministry of the Catholic Deacon, the voices of the laity are again preaching the Word of God, hopefully in a permanent, expanding role.

It would be impossible to chronicle the different uses of lay preaching in the hundreds of constantly evolving movements that constituted the Reformation. Each had to face the issue as religious fervor spread faster than their fledgling systems could handle.

However, as the focus of this project is directed toward Methodism, it is appropriate to dwell upon this movement as emblematic of many others.

As the muscular revival embodied in the People Called Methodist swept across the British Isles and the American Continent in the 18th Century, its key leader John Wesley had to make a difficult judgment. Among the ranks of Methodist societies, converts were rapidly appearing who were aflame with a burning zeal to proclaim the word of God, and were showing clear evidence that their preaching was bearing the ultimate fruit of saving souls. Despite his Oxford education and ordination in the Church of England,

John Wesley made both a wise decision and a responsible commitment. In a variety of ways, he created opportunities for those called and gifted in preaching to proclaim God's word, yet he diligently provided oversight and resources for their growth and training. Some resources flowed from Wesley's own prolific hand, others he condensed as assigned readings from a wide array of authors.

Amidst the rapid expansion of American Methodism through the 18th and 19th centuries, the role of lay speaking, or exhorting (offering spiritual encouragement and correction), was vital to the successful growth of the church. The itinerant system of traveling clergy often meant that a circuit-riding preacher had dozens of churches under his care. It was their responsibility to provide oversight, preaching, the sacraments, and training during the days they were present to the local congregation. Though the itineracy was a brilliant method of bringing order, accountability and discipleship to rapidly growing system, it did make for long periods where no ordained person was present. Many budding churches on the wide-flung frontier relied on the preaching of those among their ranks for months at a time. Though one skilled in homiletics may wince upon envisioning how some of those home-spun messages must have sounded, the Holy Spirit indeed knew best. After all, at their peak, the Methodists were aspiring to build two churches a day, and by the late 1800's had become the largest branch of the Christian faith in America.

This precedent carries across the centuries. The same vital conditions that gave one the authority to preach during the church's formative years still persist today. It is up to the leadership of the United Methodist Church to recognize and affirm from among those

with mature Christian faith, persons who show the Holy Spirit's gifting in preaching ministry. In cooperation with the guiding and gifting work of the Holy Spirit, those who lead the church are also charged with providing the best training and accountability they can offer, in order to maximize the benefit to the Kingdom of God. Amidst the multitude of responsibilities of ministry, this equipping task can often be overlooked, and the results can be a stifling of the Spirit's work, rather than cooperation. A new swell of lay speaking is on the rise. It is time to redress the charge to train the freshly called with the very best that can be made available, in order that God may keep speaking his amazing word and work to this troubled world...through them.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature and Resources

There is no shortage of books and resources on preaching. However, many of the volumes are only marginally usable, or are redundant. Following is a summary of the most pertinent resources available for the creation of a program to assist laypersons in developing the skills necessary to construct and deliver expository messages.

Resources on the Theology of Preaching:

Although books on the theology of preaching are plentiful, few are applicable to this project. Many of the best discourses on the theology of preaching are contained within other volumes focused on the practice of preaching. Preaching, by Fred Craddock, opens with a chapter on the theology of preaching that is a must-read, even if the rest of this fine book is left unread. God indeed speaks, and Craddock nurses the theme of God's voice speaking through our very being through all the movements of sermon preparation and delivery. Another book of Craddock's, As One without Authority, is also an important text in this area. John Stott's Between Two Worlds both instructs in the essence of the preaching task, and inspires a greater commitment to it. The theology of preaching also receives a thorough treatment at the hands of D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, in the early chapters of his Preaching and Preachers.

Another notable resource on the theology of preaching are the first two chapters of Thomas Long's The Witness of Preaching. In a few dozen pages, Long paints a vivid picture of the preacher as one brought forth from among the faith community, who will tell their story in relation to the greater context of God's own story. In this act of lifting the local story into God's story, the congregation is also lifted. They rise to where their story soars. Once truly owned, this image of Long's is especially valuable, as it provides not only a context for understanding the preaching moment, but captures the essential experience. It is an image that a preacher can actually feel as it happens. The sense of spiritual lift is common to preachers, and the image is self-fulfilling. Also briefly explored in chapter 2 are additional preaching images also of value: the herald, the pastor, and the storyteller.

Anointed Expository Preaching by Stephen F. Olford resembles the resources above in its combination of lived-out theology with homiletic method. However, the strength of this book is in its ability to challenge and empower. In the particulars of sermon construction, Olford descends into vagueness. Though he mentions other authors such as Robinson and Chapell, one gets the impression that he has gleaned what was most valuable to his personal preaching habits from other giants, yet is unable to get across to his reader how he does it. Though Olford is powerfully used by God in his preaching, his analysis of his own method may leave a new student of preaching frustrated. Olford's discussion of the spiritual impact of preaching, however, is very much worth reading. He portrays in a practical, experiential way, the cooperative work of the preacher and the Holy Spirit amid the entire process of sermon preparation. Indeed, this anointing spans the breadth of the

preacher's entire lifestyle. Issues such as prayer, integrity, and relevance to life are all worth a careful study in this resource. It is an urgent challenge for anyone who deems themselves a preacher to examine more closely their commitment to obedience and diligence in the task.

Resources on Exegesis and Sermon Construction:

The entire discipline of expository (or Big Idea) preaching revolves around Haddon Robinson's Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages. Though other books supplement it well, none have been found to replace it. This book establishes the essential process of discerning the main idea of a Biblical text, and developing the idea into a message. Because it is so foundational, Biblical Preaching is the one book in this Literature Review that may not be read and re-shelved. It must be continually consulted, for it contains concepts which must be second nature to anyone attempting to teach the discipline of Big Idea preaching to others. Some of these essential concepts include: the formation of an idea as a subject and complement, the developmental questions, and the pattern of inductive, deductive, and inductive-deductive sermon forms.

The great gift of Biblical Preaching is its refusal to ramble. It's concise, 10-step process keeps the reader aware of his or her place and progress. The theology is revealed in the praxis, so there is little need for a muscular method to be buried under pounds of theoretical cellulite. When studying Biblical Preaching, it is wise to have one or two

texts in mind from the beginning, and to apply Robinson's method to those sample texts as he or she progresses. This will lock down the method into regular practice, and will give a reader a sense of progress, and a means to evaluate his or her work.

The one liability of this book is its vulnerability to dilution. Contradictory materials, the encroachment of poor habits, and the limited time constraints for preparation and delivery make it a tough act to follow. A host of other books by fine authors on the praxis of preaching can obscure Dr. Robinson's process of gleaning and developing a text's idea. Seasoned preachers may have to struggle to set aside ingrained habits if they are to see the simple, yet universal truths of Biblical Preaching with any clarity. This project will strive to instill the Robinson's definition of an idea as a subject and complement as the foundation of the entire course.

Although Biblical Preaching is the primary text for this project, others were also instrumental. One critical book on the redemptive power of preaching that not only instructs, but excites, is Bryan Chapell's Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon. Although some of his methodology in outlining the sermon muddies the waters, there is one part of the book that greatly enhances the process of discerning a text's idea; the Fallen Condition Focus. These introductory chapters on the redemptive aspect of the sermon, and the complementary chapter at the end, are very valuable reading. This is Chapell's means of expressing how every Biblical text, under the aegis of the Spirit, has a particular redemptive work to achieve. Each original audience harbored an aspect of humankind's fallen nature, evidence of sin and death at

work. The message of the text and the power of the Holy Spirit work in synergy to address and redeem that Fallen Condition, and still have the power to do so today.

Across the cavernous divide of millennia and culture, the original author's audience and our audience on Sunday morning share comparable experiences of living in a fallen world, and equal capacity for redemption. The Word of God, by the Spirit, works through the Word proclaimed to transform lives. This precious truth makes the discovery of a text's main idea less elusive, as it shows what to look for. If one can see the Fallen Condition implied by the passage, then the author's intent must relate to it. Few things help bring more understanding to words than knowing why they were spoken.

Another important aspect of Christ-Centered Preaching is its ability to elevate the perceived usefulness of the Old Testament as preaching material. By applying an incarnational, redemptive process to all of God's Word, then Christ, the Living Word made flesh, becomes central to all of the Scriptures, even those written long before Jesus of Nazareth.

Despite the great value of Chapell's book, it would need to be supported by other materials in order to successfully provide instruction on the more technical aspects of sermon construction. His chapter on the elements of exegesis is choppy and jumbled, broken into sections of subcategories that relate to one another poorly. His chapter on outline form was useful, but less so than chapters six and seven of Biblical Preaching. Chapell provides an in-depth discussion on the use of illustrations, but seems to pad it with so much revolving discussion that it bogs down the flow of the book. Still, this

book provides a spiritual setting for a process of bringing Christ's transforming grace to bear on life's darkest aspects. It gives substance to a process many preachers have been reaching for intuitively, but now can do so with greater clarity. In summary, Bryan Chapell has offered a pivotal and approachable resource to the field of homiletics.

Since Lay Speakers often begin their ministry with little training in the Bible itself, this project will advance a method which is heavily dependant upon studying each text within the confines of its genre. This limits the scope of the Speaker's exegesis and increases the likelihood of successfully discerning the text's idea. Several resources were needed for this project, which all focus on the practice of preaching from a specific genre. The two general resources were Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible by Thomas Long, and The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text by Sidney Greidanus. Both survey the different genres of the Bible and suggest strategies for interpretation and preaching. Long's book has a creative zeal, and provides solid examples for a reader to follow. It does a masterful job of showing how the literary form should influence the sermon form, and how each genre uses differing literary functions to make its impact on the audience. This impact which creates the intended change within the audience is called the *rhetorical effect*. This idea partners well with Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus, though it goes beyond discovery of what the author's intent is, and into *how* the author uses that particular form to achieve it. The only drawback of Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible is that it feels incomplete. Several critical genres, such as apocalyptic and prophecy, are conspicuously absent. This book will be an indispensable tool once revised and expanded.

The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text expands into the technical aspects of hermeneutics and preaching. It offers well-researched means of overcoming the historical distance between the ancient audience and the modern, including the distance of being born before Christ. Greidanus' work provides a means to rethink our current history of interpretation, and to move closer to the scripture writer's original intent and context. It balances out current trends of over-critiquing texts, or imposing modern ideals onto them.

The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text was used in this project primarily for its thorough treatment of the different genres of the Bible. It covered prophecy very well, though it left out apocalyptic as a viable genre. However, on page 228, Greidanus seems to co-mingle apocalypse with prophetic literature. If one desires a deeper look into apocalyptic as a separate genre, there is an excellent, well-honed chapter on preaching apocalyptic in A Handbook of Contemporary Preaching, edited by Michael Diduit. A new book was also released on preaching from apocalyptic texts by Dorothy Jonaitis, entitled Unmasking Apocalyptic Texts: A Guide to Preaching and Teaching. Disappointingly, this book is focused on recasting the ominous ways the genre is used, and to replace those approaches with a theology of hope. Though there is much truth to this, the book is dominated by a liberal-Catholic, amillennial slant.

There are several other excellent books on preaching from the various literary genres. It would be difficult to find any resource more useful than Steven Matthewson's The Art of

Preaching Old Testament Narrative. Its utility is enhanced by the author's deep commitment to Big Idea preaching, which can be directly employed in this project. One should read this book after reading Biblical Preaching in order to see Robinson's methods come to life in one particular genre. Matthewson eliminates the conjectural and esoteric aspects of Old Testament studies, and gets directly to the elements of composition that the preacher needs to understand in order to successfully preach a story from the Hebrew Bible. This project depends greatly on Matthewson's work. The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative also contains excellent example sermons with discussion, and additional resources for further study at the end.

Also used, to a lesser extent, in the development of this project were Preaching from the Prophets, by James and Christine Ward, and Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom from the Pulpit by Alyce McKenzie. The book by Ward and Ward helped detail the dominant themes of the prophetic tradition, and their modern applications. To be able to categorize these themes provides mental boxes for recognizing what one is looking at while studying a text from the prophets. Though the names and places may change, the underlying themes of the prophets are reapplied, making the exegetical task simpler. The same is true for McKenzie's book on Proverbs. Oddly, though prophesy may often be simpler than it appears, Proverbs are typically more complex than meets the eye. This book expands upon the foundation laid in Long's Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible.

A host of other great preaching resources appear in magazine articles, journals, and edited collections. In the past decade, *Leadership: A Practical Journal for Church*

Leaders has published two excellent volumes on the task of preaching. Their Winter 2002 edition is entitled “Preaching to the Times: How You Discern and Present the Word for Today.” It contains practical articles on the relationship of prayer and preaching, cross-gender communication, pluralism and the pulpit, and building suspense into sermons. Their Spring 2004 edition, “Street-Level Preaching: Can You Get through with the Message?” is equally usable. It contains articles on such issues as application, addressing controversial issues, the transforming power of preaching, language/word choice. All the articles are written by persons in active ministry, with a hands-on approach in mind. Other journals, such as *The Clergy Journal*, and magazines such as *Preaching*, can provide ample insight for a minimal investment of time. They often deal with the fringe issues that would be tangential to basic preaching texts.

A book that collects short, but well-written pieces into one volume is The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching, edited by Michael Duduit. In the scope of this project, this book was used primarily for its insight on preaching from various literary genres of the Bible. All were grouped together in Part IV of the Handbook. It concluded with an excellent chapter by Richard Melick on preaching Apocalyptic texts, an area which is often neglected by other sources.

Resources on Public Speaking and Communication:

Lay Speakers assume the **task** of preaching, but not the **office** of preaching. They are in ministry, yet not pastors, and the audience receives their message as a presentation rather

than an exercise of pastoral role and authority. Although many Lay Speakers are powerfully effective, there is still a lowered expectation among the audience, coupled with an edgy fear that they may be ponderous, incomprehensible, and interminable. Lay Speakers need to be skilled public speakers. Not only do they lack the training possessed by most clergy, they also lack the regular practice needed to grow. Diligent training in the art of presentation is a necessity.

Resources on Public Speaking are in abundance. Many focus on the most common forum for making oral presentations; the business world. Ron Huff, with such titles as I Can See you Naked and Say It in Six, is widely read. However, for Lay Speakers, books such as this are to be recognized, but not recommended. Though littered with handy nuggets, too much time is wasted panning through them for a Lay Speaker to profit from their use. One notable exception is Bert Decker's You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard. This book is a readable, exciting run through the process of communication. It provides a basis for understanding the factors that empower or impede communication. The dominant theme of the book is trust, and Decker navigates the terrain of psychology and brain physiology in order to portray trust as much more than a conscious decision. The audience must trust the speaker on several conscious and subconscious levels, or the message is lost. Trust is constantly negotiated between the speaker and the audience, and the speaker must be aware of factors such as eye contact, posture, voice inflexion, and energy, if trust is to be maintained. This is valuable material for a Lay Speaker. Repeated exposure to new Lay Speakers reveals their common tendency to psychologically cocoon themselves within that unfamiliar pulpit, cut off from the joy of

engaging the congregation. Although the Gospels don't mention it, one can only imagine that when Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount, he wasn't reluctant to look his hearers in the eye. Bert Decker will help greatly in this area, and all the salient hints of Huff and company are also included in Decker's work, making most of his competition redundant.

Another important resource is Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians, by Duane Litfin. Because of its Christian emphasis, this book is probably more relevant to the task of Lay Speaking than many of the classics of preaching, such as Stott's Between Two Worlds, or Craddock's Preaching. Though John Stott and Fred Craddock are giants, their books often require a level of theological sophistication that can alienate a new Lay Speaker. Although this is the most comprehensive and relevant book on Public Speaking listed here, its real value is demonstrated when used to amplify the points made in Robinson's Biblical Preaching. Critical ingredients from Dr. Robinson's method can slip from the mind early in the learning process, and Duane Litfin's fine handbook, particularly in Chapters 3, 5, and 10, buttresses the essentials of Big Idea Preaching. These chapters focus on discovering and developing the idea, and the preparation of Biblical messages. Because of the teaching relationship between Drs. Robinson and Litfin, their work is fully compatible, while the material of so many other fine writers must be sidelined, as it can complicate or contradict the fundamentals of expository preaching.

An important tool for understanding the process through which the spoken word is received and responded to by an audience is Creating Understanding, by Donald K.

Smith. This excellent textbook broadens one's awareness of the intricacies of communication. Every able communicator must realize that communication is more than a single action. It is a process that involves action from both the speaker and the audience. Understanding the audience is critical to the discipline of preaching, since the goal of preaching, and all communication, is to mutually increase the level of commitment to an idea. Smith applies sound principles of communication to more theological realms such as trust and conversion. His 23 propositions are worth committing to memory, in order that they may be applied to life situations, and used to evaluate the effectiveness of one's preaching ministry. This book is most useful for missiology students, as it delves deeply into cross-cultural issues. Yet anyone interested in deepening one's awareness of how human beings interact will benefit from studying this text.

United Methodist Resources:

The United Methodist Church has a guidebook for nearly every aspect of its ministry. There are handbooks for new members, guides for church treasurers, and all in between. There is even an official guidebook on how to work with Boy/Girl Scout programs. Most are created by or in cooperation with the denomination's General Board of Discipleship. In the area of Lay Speaking, the General Board currently has more than three dozen resources available. The three primary resources are all written by John P. Gilbert; Lay Speaking Ministries Basic Course, Go Preach! A Primer for Beginning Preachers, and Lay Speakers Preach. The Basic Course book is a 42 page handout that is given to

students during their training as a Local Church Lay Speaker. It supplies an overview of the role of the Lay Speaker, and some rudiments of preaching through a series of discussions and exercises. The second and third resources by Gilbert are the standard materials for the Advanced Course, which prepares those who have already completed the Basic Course to become Certified Lay Speakers. These books are more in-depth, but still offer little advice on the exegesis of a passage, formation of an idea, and the development of a sermon. Much of the content of Go Preach! is useful and well-conceived. However, Gilbert uses most of the 127 page in this book to discuss the general aspects of service as a Lay Speaker. Less than one-third of the book discusses sermon preparation.

Persons responsible for the training and supervision of Lay Speakers are expected to own and read Lay Speaking Ministries: Guide for Conference and District Committees, by James W. Lane. It is a short but indispensable resource. Additional Advanced Lay Speaking courses in other areas of ministry are also available, and many are offered in Spanish and Korean. All of these resources provide the information needed to understand the setting of this project. Each of the resources above may be ordered from the General Board of Discipleship at www.discipleshipresources.org.

In the connectional system of the United Methodist Church, the foundational document of the denomination is The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, or the Discipline, for short. The Discipline is revised every four years, following the quadrennial General Conference. The portion of the Discipline that discusses the role

and training of Lay Speakers are paragraphs 268 to 272. Also applicable are paragraphs 630 and 665, which elaborate on the organizational responsibility of the broader church for its Lay Speakers.

Additional information on Lay Speaking may be accessed online from the menu options on the denomination's websites at www.umc.org and www.gbod.org/laity/.

Resources on the Issue of Lay Preaching:

Anyone daring to delve into the recruitment and training of Lay Speakers should grapple with the overlap in the historical roles of laity and clergy. Simply declaring that laypersons should preach is not enough; one should know why. A biblical and theological basis should be built in one's mind, and applied to the changing winds of history. This is especially true given the United Methodist context of this project, for today Lay Speakers can be assigned to a church to functionally fill all the roles of a pastor except the sacraments.

Many of the books on this issue come from the context that would seem least likely to welcome lay participation in the role of the clergy; the Catholic Church. Two brief books take an interesting look both backwards at history and forward to new possibilities. One is written by Patricia Parachini, and is entitled Lay Preaching: State of the Question. Another, edited by Nadine Foley, is Preaching and the Non-Ordained: An Interdisciplinary Study. Both take a worthwhile, but somewhat limited look into the

Early Church's and Catholic Church's relationship to laity in the preaching role.

Although both books have done the difficult work of sifting through a long history to isolate one issue, they neglect the Protestant traditions. A critical reading of both books also reveals a nuance that the additional goal of both authors is to advance gender issues as well as those of clergy/laity. Despite this agenda, one can still benefit from reading these books in formation of a working theology of laity in the pulpit.

Methodist history proclaims an impressive roster of gifted lay preachers who have been instrumental to the rise of the denomination. Their lives and experiences are worth a deeper look, for this project seeks to enable their corollaries in a different age. Among the numerous histories of Methodism available, two stand out: Wesley and the People Called Methodists by Richard Heitzenrater, and The Story of American Methodism by Frederick Norwood. Both are thorough, yet readable. They are among the most common texts used in United Methodist seminaries, and are required texts in the correspondence-based course in Methodist History offered by the denomination's General Board of Discipleship. Both books fairly treat the potent role of the laity, and resist the temptation to dwell on founders, clerics, and bishops. The colorful history of gifted preachers who never needed ordination to transform countless lives will leave one more deeply convinced of the vital contribution of the Lay Speaker.

Chapter Four: Project Design

Introduction to the Course and Handbook:

This course, despite its complexity, is focused on a simple, two-part goal:

Upon completion of this course, the student shall demonstrate the ability to (1.) construct and (2.) preach an expository message which expresses the Idea of the student's scripture passage. This sermon must:

1. Have sufficient clarity that the majority of the class members can later describe it in subject/complement form.
2. Have an Idea that the instructor agrees is accurately derived from the passage.

Although it would be a wonderful accomplishment for class of Lay Speakers grasp the entire praxis of expository preaching in 12 hours, that goal is not realistic. This workbook is designed to enable a Lay Speaker to progress from an open Bible sitting abreast of a blank page, to the delivery of a sermon which has a meaningful idea at its core. The resource is to serve as a tool to get past that initial point of frustration.

The workbook will be designed to act as a companion to the process of sermon preparation each time the Lay Speaker embarks on a new message. The genre-based approach will limit the scope of the students' research, guiding them toward the information most relevant to the exposition of the text.

Assessment of Student Entry Skills:

The United Methodist Lay Speaker training Program draws persons from all walks of life. There is a wonderful diversity among participants. Persons with a Ph.D. will sit in the same class with those who have not completed High School. Some class members will have decades of preaching experience and intimate knowledge of the Bible, while others would be hard pressed to name ten books of the Old Testament. Participants can range in age from senior citizens to teenagers. Negotiations are underway to offer this preaching course to prison inmates.

This diversity of experience makes the development of curriculum and resources a challenge. Obviously, any resource offered must be simple enough to appeal to the broadest audience, yet also offer enough depth to satisfy the savvy. This project is intended to be a user-friendly substitute which overcomes common points of frustration experienced with the existing curriculum. It is necessary to determine where prior students encountered the most difficulty.

The assessment of entry-level skills and analysis of the areas of greatest need for improvement within the District Lay Speaker training program were derived from three sources:

1. A survey of the active Lay Speakers in the District.

2. Personal experience derived from 12 years of active involvement in the training and deployment of Lay Speakers, as well as several long-term mentoring relationships with active Lay Speakers.

3. Dialogue with the New York-Connecticut District Committee on Lay Speaking during the formation process of the course. This committee is composed of both clergy and laity. Laypersons on the committee are all Advanced Lay Speakers with an active record of preaching experience in multiple churches throughout the District.

The Survey Process:

The roster of active Lay Speakers in the area of this project is continually changing. New classes of Advanced Lay Speakers are conducted at least four times a year, and there is a high drop-off rate. A yearly Report of Activities must be filed by Lay Speakers every year if their status is to be continued. Many reports are lost or never completed, so the list is in constant flux. During the time frame of this project, the New York Annual Conference reduced the number of districts within its borders for financial reasons. This resulted in the re-alignment of district boundaries. Due to the disparity in training practices between the Lay Speaking programs of the former districts, the District Superintendent created a compromise, where **two** Lay Speaking Committees would operate with two very different programs.

Despite the chaotic setting, the muddle of redistricting made the process of gathering information less difficult. The list of potential respondents to the survey also expanded, allowing broader participation. At present, there are roughly 48 active Lay Speakers in the district.

The survey questions on the following page were presented to active Lay Speakers within the District either in writing during Lay Speaker events, by telephone interview, or via email:

LAY SPEAKER SURVEY

Gender : ☐ M ☐ F

1. Have you completed the Advanced Course on Preaching? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. Was the text for the Advanced Course:

☐ Go Preach! ☐ Freedom in the Pulpit ☐ A different resource

3. Have you participated in any of the following?

☐ Disciple Bible Study ☐ Regular small-group Bible study

☐ College/Seminary courses on the Bible ☐ Academic courses on preaching

☐ Short-term or long-term mission trips

4. Approximately how many times have you preached since you took the Advance Course? ☐ Less than 5 ☐ 5-10 ☐ More than 10

5. Were the majority of these preaching opportunities:

☐ In my home church ☐ In another church

6. Do you intend to pursue vocational ministry as a Certified Lay Minister, Local Pastor, Deacon, or Elder? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Unsure

7. How would you rate the Advanced Course on Preaching in terms of how effectively it taught you to prepare a sermon, with 5 as most effective?

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

8. Which part of preaching do you find MOST difficult?

___ researching a text

___ getting a clear idea for the message

___ building an outline and structure

___ writing out a manuscript

___ supporting material such as illustrations and introductions

___ the public speaking/delivery of the sermon

9. Is there one specific area that you with the Advanced Course had focused in greater depth?

Survey results:

Twenty-four of the District's Lay Speakers responded to the survey. Seventeen of the respondents were women. All but two had completed the Advanced Course on Preaching (one can take the Advanced Course on Worship as an alternate path to Certification as a Lay Speaker). Two-thirds had used the current Go Preach text, while all others had used a different resource. Nearly all (90%) had either taken Disciple Bible study, which is the denomination's feature, one-year survey course on the Bible, or had been a part of a

regular small group Bible study. Only four had any academic courses in either the Bible or preaching. Since becoming Certified Lay Speakers, most respondents have been active as preachers. Only three reported preaching fewer than five times since they completed the Advanced Course.

Although Certified Lay Speakers are entitled to preach in other churches than their own, very few of those surveyed had done so (only 4). Responses were almost equal between “yes,” “no,” and “unsure” when questioned on intention to enter vocational ministry in the future.

Evaluations of the current course were surprisingly high. All but three gave the existing course either a 4 or 5, out of a 1-5 scale. When asked what areas of sermon writing still give them the most difficulty, respondents focused on research, and form issues. The standout concern expressed (60%) was the need for better resources in researching the text and exegesis.

In summary, most respondents were satisfied with the current course, but still felt they lacked what they needed to fully engage the initial process of interpreting a text.

Dialogue with the District Committee on Lay Speaking:

In preparation for offering this course, the District Committee graciously consented to have their traditional program co-opted to make way for this project. All eight persons

on the committee were dissatisfied with the limitations of the current curriculum. They were aware that other District committees had already implemented their own replacement courses, and were ready to try something different if this author would commit to teaching the courses. However, they were unable to deviate from the six-session time frame currently in use. Any course offered had to fit into that time frame, for the sake of consistency and equity with prior graduates. They reinforced the need for a handy, practical resource. Two committee members expressed concern that some prior participants had taken the Advanced Course under the misconception that it would give them a foot in the door in the ordination process. They requested that any resource provided would clearly state that ordination and placement were entirely different processes from Lay Speaker training. This subject is addressed in the Introduction of the resource text.

Priorities in the Development of the Course and Resource Book:

The development of the workbook was focused through the following six priorities:

1. Lay Speakers are volunteers. Their commitment to the program is based upon their desire to serve and the stimulation of their interest. Therefore, the content of the course and handbook must be energizing and encouraging. The style of writing and presentation must be conversational and warm in tone. Although the word “entertaining” may overstate this priority, the word “enjoyable” does not. The Lay Speaking student must

feel engaged and empowered, and not feel bogged down by excessive information or complex, unclear text. This leads to the next priority:

2. The entirety of the exegetical process can not be expressed in this resource. Some material must be excluded. The material must be developed in concord with the needs of the average student, rather than the desire of the writer.

3. The handbook must be replete with examples. The student must be invited into the thinking process by which Bible passages are converted into Ideas. Since Lay Speaking courses do not offer anything close to sufficient time to explain all the material, the resource must be instrumental as the student prepares his or her sermon.

4. Class participants shall have a limited selection of texts upon which to preach their own sermon. The list of pericopes must be furnished by the instructor. The instructor must have a high level of familiarity with each text, and shall be able to recite each text's idea, as well as describe the process of gleaning the idea. The list of possible texts should include a representative text from each genre. No two classmates should preach from the same genre.

5. A strong emphasis on relationships and peer encouragement must permeate the class. The students are partially motivated to participate by their desire for Christian relationships and sharing. However, this is also a valuable element of the class. Mutual conversation and positive feedback will drive the learning process forward. The

development of preaching ability is to be viewed as more than an acquired skill. Rather, it is to be expressed as a formation of one's identity in relationship with others.

6. Discussion of the Big Idea must dominate the first two class sessions. Students have often been subjected to decades of poor preaching, and the "paradigm shift" toward one crystal-clear idea is as important as for doctoral students in homiletics. Each participant must overcome his or her perception of what a sermon is, or else they will simply discard the material and succumb to the temptation to splatter the audience with a few exegetical details and wipe it up with a story at the end.

The Workbook:

The workbook, which is enclosed as Appendix C, is intended to be the principal resource for this course. It is to be distributed in each initial class session.

PLEASE NOTE: This resource is formatted to operate as a separate entity. Therefore, the font, writing style, and documentation will change according to its colloquial style.

As an accompaniment to the workbook, the list of suggested scripture passages for the students' sermons (Appendix A), shall be prepared. The instructor must have thoroughly researched each of the passages it contains, and have derived his or her own idea statements for each passage.

Course Outline:

Resources for all sessions: Copy of workbook for each student in 3-ring binder, Bibles in multiple translations, dry-erase board or chalkboard, reproduced list of suggested Scripture passages for each student, lectern, package of Certified Lay Speaker Certificates, available from the U.M. Board of Discipleship.

Session One:

This session shall begin with introductions, prayer, and distribution of the workbook. The concept of the idea as a meaningful connection between two facets of reality shall be explained, using the examples contained in Chapter 3 of the workbook. The learning goal for this session is for the students to be able to identify the subject and complement of an idea statement, and to be able to discard idea statements that are in unworkable form, such as those composed of incomplete sentences, or subjects that pose a yes/no question. The students shall be engaged in the process of revision of an idea statement until they willingly volunteer additional details and rewordings on incomplete subjects and complements. Five minutes before the termination of class, the instructor shall distribute the list of suggested Bible passages (see Appendix A). Each student shall select a passage for his or her sermon, with the provision that no two students may select texts from the same genre. The following homework shall then be assigned. The session shall conclude with a review of key terms, and closing prayer.

Homework assignment: Each student shall be asked to read his or her text in at least three different versions (students who require more Bibles are permitted to borrow copies from the church library). Students shall then be asked to study the passage in depth, taking notes on form, content and meaning, and return with their notes the following week. Also, students will be asked to read chapter 1 of the workbook, which covers the use of study tools.

Session Two:

The second session shall open with greetings and prayer, followed by a review time to refresh material from the prior session. One of the additional sample texts from the Appendix of the workbook shall be discussed as means of reinforcement. The instructor shall permit time for questions, and will then proceed to a 20-minute lecture format. The material on pages 70-73 of the workbook shall be covered in depth, paying particular attention to link the truth that communication is offered to effect a change with author's intent and the redemptive nature of God's word. This will prepare the students for transition to Bible passages as the focus for determining a text's idea. Sample idea statements that demonstrate the successful rendering of God's redemptive intent will be provided. At least two Bible passages with easily derived subjects and complements (such as the Parable of the Persistent Widow) shall then be discussed, and the idea statements from each shall be clearly written on either a chalkboard or dry erase board. One of the unselected texts from the suggestion sheet shall then be analyzed in discussion format, encouraging the students to collaboratively construct and improve the idea statement. The class shall have a time for additional questions, especially those related to

the outcome of research on each student's chosen text for the final 10 minutes of class, after which the homework assignment shall be explained. Finally, the students shall choose whether they will preach their sermon during either Session Five or Session Six. The second session shall close in prayer, asking one of the students to volunteer as the leader.

Homework assignment: Each student shall prepare an idea statement in subject complement, then in combined form, for his or her selected text. Considerable time should be spent refining the idea to its most fluid form, ensuring that the subject and complement encompass the entirety of the text. Idea statements shall be brought in, with sufficient copies to share with the other students and instructor, for the next class session.

Session Three:

The session shall open in student-led prayer. The first hour of class time shall be devoted to the sharing of each student's idea statements. Each student shall present the thought process by which he or she derived the statement. Peers shall be invited to suggest changes or improvements. Attention will be paid to time allowances to ensure each student the opportunity for presentation. Following the presentation of students' idea statements, the class shall proceed into a 40-minute lecture format. The instructor shall focus on the material chapter 4 of the workbook on the developmental questions and inductive verses deductive sermon forms. Each student shall be able to verbally distinguish inductive form from deduction, both by reciting a working definition, and by recognizing examples of each. The remainder of class time shall be spent addressing

students' questions and comments, and, if possible, discussing what developmental questions would apply to each student's idea statement, and whether that statement would be most conducive to inductive or deductive development. The class shall close in student-led prayer.

Homework assignment: Each student shall list which developmental question applies to his or her idea, if the audience were his or her own church members. They shall declare whether their idea shall be developed inductively, deductively, or inductively-deductively. Finally, students shall compose outlines for their messages, bringing copies for each student and instructor to the next session.

Session Four:

The session shall open with student-led prayer. The instructor shall review by inviting questions upon the material presented the prior session. Following the question and answer time, the instructor shall ask the class to open their workbooks to chapter 6. One hour shall be spent discussing the use of supportive material; illustrations, introductions, conclusions. Specific attention shall be paid to the proportion of supportive material to exegetical content, sources of illustrations, the purpose of introductions and conclusions, and the pitfalls of illustrations included in the chapter. Remaining time shall be spent discussing the final portion of chapter 6 on incorporating supportive material into the sermon body. The students' own outlines shall be used as examples for discussion on where and what type of illustration would enhance the effectiveness of the sermon. The

session shall close with student-led prayer, with consideration that each student should have a chance to lead before one student leads a second time.

Homework assignment: All students shall complete their sermon manuscripts, regardless of whether they will be preaching during Session Five or Six. Sermon manuscripts may not be longer than four handwritten or three typewritten pages.

Session Five:

The class shall begin with student-led prayer. Presentation and discussion of sermons shall begin immediately to ensure sufficient time. Two (or three) students shall read their Scripture passage and deliver their sermons to the class from a standing position at a lectern. Following the presentation of each sermon, the participants in the audience shall each be requested to write down the subject and complement of the sermon's idea as they heard it. Feedback discussion shall begin with this area, with observances from the instructor and peers on ways to increase the clarity in which the message conveys the idea. Following this discussion, the instructor shall invite the class to offer first positive, then critical comments on content, form, and illustrations. If time is available, the class shall be invited to offer positive and negative feedback on delivery, followed by general guidelines on delivery issues such as pace, volume, and gesture offered by the instructor. The class shall adjourn with student-led prayer.

Homework assignment: None, unless a student desires to revise his or her sermon in light of class experience.

Session Six:

The class shall begin with student-led prayer. The remaining two (or three) students shall deliver their sermons to the class. Following the presentation of each sermon, the participants in the audience shall each be requested to write down the subject and complement of the sermon's idea as they heard it. Feedback discussion shall begin with this area, with observances from the instructor and peers on ways to increase the clarity in which the message conveys the idea. Following this discussion, the instructor shall invite the class to offer first positive, then critical comments on content, form, and illustrations. If time is available, the class shall be invited to offer positive and negative feedback on delivery. The final fifteen minutes of class time shall be reserved for verbal feedback upon the course and the students' experiences of using the workbook during sermon preparation. The instructor shall take notes and offer expressions of gratitude for each student's participation.

The certificates of completion for the course shall be distributed, and the students shall fill out the personal information fields for their own certificate. The instructor shall collect them and forward them to the District Lay Speaking Coordinator and the District Superintendent to be signed and recorded. The certificates will be mailed to the student's home. Each student shall be reminded before leaving of the importance of filing yearly activity reports in order to maintain their certified standing, and consulted upon their willingness to be placed on a contact list for pulpit supply to surrounding churches.

Chapter Five: Outcomes, Conclusions, and Future Study

Outcome of Courses:

This course was taught twice in the year 2006. Each class was scheduled to meet for six 2-hour sessions, and had four persons per class. (Enrollment was capped at 8 per class.)

The first class was held in conjunction with a District-wide, Sunday evening program during Lent. (March 5-April 9, 2006) It was hosted by the Trinity United Methodist Church of Newburgh, New York. Although more than 100 persons attended each week, after a common gathering, the group intentionally separated into pre-registered classes in a diversity of subjects. Advanced Lay Speaking was one course out of six possibilities.

The second class met on Tuesday evenings from October 10 to November 14 of 2006. All sessions were hosted by the United Methodist Church of Cornwall, New York. The church facility was not in use for any other activities during these meetings. Both classes of four were composed of three females and one male. In the first class, two of the females were mother and daughter. This seemed to have no effect on the dynamic of the class. The mother was in her sixties, and her daughter in her late thirties. There was one other woman in the first class in her sixties, and one man in his mid-forties. The second class was composed of one gentleman in his sixties, one woman in her fifties, and two women in their forties.

In both classes, the students were enthusiastic about the concept of a workbook-style resource to assist in sermon preparation. Since students had already submitted the

required \$35 materials fee, all students were given a copy of the standard textbook, Go Preach!, although it was not used for the course. The workbooks were distributed and the goals of the course were presented.

In both classes, discussion of the idea as a meaningful connection took on a life of its own. One joy of teaching this concept is that there is very little information to present. It is a deeper way of thinking about thinking. Although every member of the classes was able to retain the definitions, only three were clearly able to put the concept to use in the exercises. The gentleman in the first class grasped and employed the concept of the idea with such ease that this writer was ready to frisk him for a Gordon-Conwell student I.D. He was able to rattle out subjects and complements for the exercise texts that were surprisingly inclusive of the texts' entire message. In both classes the younger women (forties and under) were able to grasp and use the material effectively. This raises an interesting question about the relationship between age and amenability to the material and/or methods, but the class group was far too small a sample to provide any insight. The other four class members struggled to varying degrees. One difficulty they expressed was gathering the right words to express their mental pictures with precision. One woman in the second class expressed it best, "Give me a minute. I think I'm getting it. My brain is cookin.'"

The presented material that seemed to fascinate the students the most was the portion on the developmental questions. They recognized the value of this subject as a means to understand all of their communication. Once an idea is expressed, it can be explained,

proven, or applied. The minimal categories helped them define what they were doing as they wrote. It bridged the gap between intentional content and “padding.”

Not surprisingly, those who showed fluency for writing subjects and complements retained that edge in the construction of their sermons. Three of the students were able to bring acceptable idea statements to Session Three. The remaining five required peer and instructor feedback to hone idea statements that encompassed the entirety of their texts. Two of the eight students appeared resistant to rendering their idea statements in a redemptive direction. One student was deeply committed to his idea statement on Matthew 16:1-4, which he wrote as “God will judge those who miss his signs.” Though close, the statement lacked the meaningful connection and redemptive focus that would make it an adequate expression of Matthew’s intent. Although the class tried to improve the idea, he went back to his original idea when he wrote his manuscript.

It was evident that two of the students jettisoned the course material and retreated to their prior method. The gentleman who deftly grasped the concepts of the course produced a sermon on Proverbs 14:20 that was in excellent form, and powerfully presented. After preaching his message in class, he gave a copy of his manuscript to his own pastor, who read it and immediately changed his preaching schedule in order to have the Lay Speaker preach his message the following Sunday. This student was obviously highly gifted, both intellectually and spiritually, and though the church needs more of such people, he was an irregularity for the class.

The eight sermons presented were happily of sufficient clarity that they would be usable for a Sunday church service. However, the exercise did not achieve the instructional goals of the course. Only three generated responses of perceived idea statements which, allowing for variety in language, matched the presenter's idea statement. This writer was concerned that the process of assisting one another in forging idea statements would cause the students to recall the presenter's idea from class discussion instead of from the message itself. The concern was misguided. In the two to three week interim between the discussion of idea statements and the delivery of sermons, the students appeared to have forgotten all the idea statements except their own.

Amid the discussion times of both courses, several challenging questions were raised by the students, which the workbook should address in improved detail in future revisions:

1. "Is there really only one idea from each text, and how can you really know if you have it?" Oddly, this author posed the identical question to Duane Litfin during the first residency of this program. He answered it better.
2. "Don't some texts, like in John and some prophets, have different levels of meaning, and therefore multiple ideas? How do you know which one to take?"
3. "Doesn't sticking with the author's intent on Old Testament passages block us from preaching Christ?"

During the time of concluding course feedback, all students expressed appreciation for the provision of a fresh approach to preaching. Four students said that they believed they would be better able to engage the process of moving from research to sermon. One female student expressed the reservation, “The Big Idea part is kind of hard. I’m not sure I can just do that on my own and get it right.” This author conveyed that in his own experience, not every idea statement is, upon reflection, as precise as one would prefer. Yet, the entire process of preaching is enhanced by having this expository method in place, and consistency comes with growth and practice.

Conclusions:

After the completion of two class sessions, I am able to discern the following eight conclusions. The first five make observations on the material itself, and the final three are realizations of a more inward nature:

1. For this particular class format, enrollment must be capped at 5. Additional enrollment would require additional sessions. Each participant must have close to an hour of time in order to present a 15-minute message and allow for the feedback criteria to be fully discussed. It takes time to successfully backtrack through the form of a message, and convey how it conveys (or obscures) the main idea. Realistically, the 6-session format will always be inadequate, but that was the reason I created the workbook resource in the first place.

2. The classroom environment truly does matter. In the first class, the commotion of moving from common meal to individual classes, then back to closing worship created distraction and tardiness. In the second course, each student preached his or her sermon in the church's sanctuary. The liturgical setting added energy to their presentation. However, the dim, forward facing structure made evaluative discussion after each sermon much more difficult. A suitable compromise would be a comfortable, quiet room with a lectern surrounded by a "u" of chairs. The Cornwall church has a downstairs children's chapel which would have been ideal if more forethought were given. I can increase my competency as an instructor by more diligently crafting the learning environment.

3. The handbook that was created during the course of this project must be continually revised. Like many pieces of writing begun with enthusiasm and tempered by reality, it is more densely written in the initial chapters, and thins at the end. The genre chapters need additional examples, and the verbiage in chapters 1-3 must be trimmed. A better research effort would be to have at least 20 Lay Speakers use the book on their own as principal tool to craft a message, then have the Lay speaker deliver it (or submit a manuscript) to an audience composed of several persons reliably trained in this method. That critique would prove or disprove the central thesis goal of whether a Lay Speaker can use the resource to produce a message with a single, clear Idea. This writer recognizes this goal must be pursued before the handbook can be sufficiently tested and refined to be submitted to the denomination for publication.

4. This writer is not convinced that the method used for increasing one's comfort level with the notion of the Big Idea is effective. The workbook featured amusing, self-written snippets that represented various genres of writing as the initial exercises in teaching the idea. There is less danger of overwhelming the student with hermeneutics. Of course, anyone familiar with Biblical Preaching would recognize that this practice was cheerfully borrowed from Haddon Robinson. The students enjoyed the exercises, but there remains some doubt if the transition to scripture doesn't drop students into an intellectual crevasse. It was stressed repeatedly during each class that the essential difference between Scripture and general writing is that each unit of Scripture has a redemptive focus.

5. One important observation is so obvious, it is easily overlooked. The resource created through this project is only as useful as its presenter. Any person chosen to offer this course, using this resource, would have to be entirely committed to the principles of Robinson's Biblical Preaching in order to be effective. The problem is magnified when one realizes that less than one percent of all potential instructors for this course will have been schooled in this method. United Methodist seminaries commonly teach textual/thematic preaching, or the classic Catholic/Anglican homily format (Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition, Application, Conclusion). The current resources are so vague that Lay Speaking trainers have grown accustomed to simply teaching what works for themselves. Due to this consideration, this handbook should remain a supplement, rather than a substitute, for the course.

6. This project demanded maturation in my style of writing in several areas. The first area is concise academic writing. In the writing of the thesis, two distinct types of writing were recognized; the more succinct writing of chapters 4 and 5, and a more abstract theological writing for chapter 2. The second was the development of a cheery, yet usable style of explanatory writing for the workbook portion enclosed in Chapter 4.

7. Every doctoral project should press the limits of a student's ability. Yet out on the fringes, the frayed ends of weakness become more evident. At the onset of this project, I believed my soft spots were in the discipline of Communication. This is an area of study for which I have a passionate flair but little formal training. At the conclusion of this project, I realize that I did not have a true sense of research methods or goals before I began. I did much of my research without knowing what I was looking for. I also expended much of my research efforts on the creation of the theology chapter, while relying on my own awareness of expository preaching to develop the main project. Therefore, much of the research that I did, including the survey, seems irrelevant. I have discerned through dialogue with peers that research woes are a common experience in many Doctor of Ministry programs. Pastors who pursue this professional degree often retain a vague sense of research methods until it is too late. Were I to undertake another thesis project (and I will need to, as I intend to pursue a Ph.D. in Communications), I would choose a more fact-driven topic, and would organize my research more carefully.

8. After research methods, the additional area where more growth is needed is the process of curriculum development. The presentation on teaching method in the final residency

of this Doctor of Ministry program was my first exposure to such material. Like many pastors, I was trained in scattered disciplines and dropped into the pastorate to learn as I served. Although I love teaching, and receive enthusiastic feedback when I do, over the past dozen years I have grown accustomed to teaching “off the cuff.” A project of this magnitude reveals those deficiencies. Further study is needed on the process of setting learning goals, creation of a lesson plan, and teaching a class session that sticks to a well-thought lesson plan.

Areas of Future Study and Development:

This project’s method of teaching homiletics in a genre-restricted format is a promising avenue to pursue. There are critical casualties in the homiletic process when a cookie-cutter approach is taken. Each genre is so specific as to require an individual approach, and a separate strategy of composition. This author believes that this project has stirred the possibility of creating a valuable resource in the field of preaching. However, far more development is needed before this can be merged into a usable piece for general homiletics. The resource rendered in this project is in a minimal form. It deliberately ignores the facets of exegesis and sermon construction that rely on original language skills and advanced hermeneutics. In this project, areas such as outlining and moving from exegetical to homiletic ideas are covered by relying upon intuitive leaps, rather than weighing down a fledgling lay preacher with confusing material. Something on a grander scale would be needed for those who wish to pursue preaching as a life vocation.

This writer envisions a well-crafted textbook for seminarians, which merges the foundational concepts of Haddon Robinson's expository method with the genre-sensitive work of scholars such as Thomas Long and Sidney Greidanus. Some of this work has already been done. Steven Matthewson produced an impressive body of work in his thesis submitted to Gordon-Conwell, later published as The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative. Other quality theses have been submitted on the expository preaching of Psalms and Proverbs. One central editor of high credibility and total commitment to Biblical Preaching could draw together scholars with a lively expertise in each literary form. A coordinated effort such as this in each genre would generate unique expository methods that are all conducive to Big Idea preaching. This would bring out a missing facet of Robinson's expository definition, "derived from and transmitted through a...*literary* study of a passage in its context." (Robinson 20 emphasis mine) This author truly believes this text would complete an outcome that Biblical Preaching has been pointing toward since it was deftly forged three decades ago.

APPENDIX A:
SAMPLE HANDOUT FOR CLASS SESSION ONE:
SUGGESTED TEXTS FOR STUDENT PREACHING ASSIGNMENT

Pick one of the texts below for your sermon:

1. Psalm 19 (poetry)
2. Numbers 21:4-9 (narrative)
3. Mark 8:27-9:1 (narrative)
4. Jeremiah 31:31-34 (prophecy)
5. 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 (epistle)
6. Galatians 5:1-6 (epistle)
7. Proverbs 14:20 (proverb)
8. Proverbs 20:25 (proverb)
9. Psalm 61 (poetry)
10. Matthew 16:1-4 (narrative)
11. Habakkuk 3:16-19 (prophecy, poetry)
12. Acts 18:24-28 (narrative)

APPENDIX B:

GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN THIS PROJECT

Advanced Lay Speaking Class: The successor class of the Basic Course on Lay Speaking. The Advanced Course in Preaching is required in order to serve as a Certified Lay Speaker, a lay member who is eligible to preach and lead worship in other churches than the one in which he or she holds membership.

Annual Conference: In the United Methodist Church, an Annual Conference is both a yearly gathering for discussion, and the geographic area from which its participants reside. Each conference is overseen by a bishop, and serves as the administrative body for coordinating the clergy and lay ministry of the local churches. A conference is divided into districts, each with an appointed Superintendent.

Basic Lay Speaking Class: The introductory course on Lay Speaking which qualifies a graduate to preach within the local church which he or she is a member.

Certified Lay Minister: A Lay Speaker who has been asked by a Bishop or District Superintendent to serve a local church (often with very small membership) as a non-sacramental pastor. A Certified Lay Minister may or may not be either compensated.

Certified Lay Speaker: A member of a local United Methodist Church who has completed both the Basic Lay Speaking Course and an Advanced Lay Speaking Course in Preaching or Worship. A Certified Lay Speaker may be invited to preach in any church in the conference. He or she must maintain Certified standing through the submission of yearly reports and the completion of at least one additional Advanced course every three years.

General Conference: The primary gathering and governing body of the United Methodist Church. It meets every four years.

Local Church Lay Speaker: A member of a local United Methodist Church who has successfully completed the Basic Lay Speaking Course, and has maintained his or her status through the submission of annual Lay Speaking Activity Reports. He or she is deemed ready to preach at the direction of the pastor, yet is required to do so only in their local church.

**APPENDIX C:
THE HANDBOOK OF BIG IDEA PREACHING
FOR LAY SPEAKERS**

THE HANDBOOK
OF
BIG IDEA
PREACHING
FOR LAY SPEAKERS

*Bob Milsom
Cornwall United Methodist Church
196 Main street
Cornwall, New York, 12518*

Introduction:

Welcome, Lay Speaker!

Glad you're here!

Whether you have been an active Lay Speaker for years, or you are just getting started, this guidebook is here to help you.

May God truly bless you, and others through you, as you grow in this ministry. You have a very important role!

Feeling nervous? Having qualms about getting stuck drawing a blank on what to do, with a preaching engagement bearing down? We understand that feeling! That's why this guidebook is here for you. Step by step, we will walk with you the whole way. It's an amazing trip!

Will it be easy? Nope. But what truly worthwhile thing is? It will take some work, and call for some new skills and habits. It is a winding path, with lots to do along the way, and there are no shortcuts, only nice-looking side trips that go nowhere. But don't give up, or get overwhelmed! When you are done, you will emerge from the process better prepared to offer a truly Biblical, relevant sermon to God's church. That's always our goal. If you still feel daunted by it all, here's some good news right up front:

You already have an advantage!

That's right, you do! People listen to Lay Speakers with different expectations. Not lower expectations, but different ones. You will represent a fresh voice, a break from the ordinary. The folks in front of you will be eager to identify with you. They will respect you for the courage and devotion it took to give your time and energy to be there for them. It is exciting to watch someone's God-given gifts coming to life and benefiting the whole church. No matter how much a church loves their pastor, a Lay Speaker is special. It really is an advantage.

A spiritual check-up.

This guidebook you are reading is hands-on. If you also want to get into the theology of preaching, there are some great resources listed at the end of the chapter. Take a look at them when you can. Not many things get done well when the doers don't know what they are doing, or why. But this book is about *how*. Still, it pays to give yourself a spiritual physical when you are starting a journey like this one.

First, what are your motives? If you are like most Lay Speakers, you probably have a growing, solid role in your local church. Perhaps you or a leader in your church recognized some gifts and graces for Lay Speaking ministry. God's Spirit really does give gifts to us, and empowers us to use them, not for our own benefit, but for the building up of the body of Christ, the church. Lay Speaking is one of the means by which we can use some of our gifts. But they are always God's gifts, used for God's church. It is a humbling role, one that teaches us God's awesome glory amidst our fragile limitations. And though we will likely be blessed along the way, we are doing this for God and God's church. Why not take a while to reflect, to thank God for the opportunity to speak from the Living Word, and to ask God for a heart-searching that will reveal and purify whatever is needed?

Perhaps you are sensing God's calling into a more formal ministry. Taking part in the Lay Speaking ministry can help you discern your gifts for professional Christian service, but it is not a way into it. It is doubtful that, as a Lay Speaker, you would be more likely to "get noticed" for ministry staff positions or appointments. The goal of Lay Speaking ministry is to be a blessing to the church as a Lay Speaker, in the many precious forms that ministry takes on. There is a completely separate candidacy process for entering professional ministry, and those who feel that calling are encouraged to engage themselves in that process...one outcome does not depend on the other.

Motives matter, and even when the good motives are in command of the ship of faith, there still may be stowaways who snuck on board. Now is a good time for a prayerful look within. Are we doing this to satisfy our need to be needed? Is our pride on the line? Do we want to be praised? These are all tough questions, but ones we need to ask.

Second, how would you describe your faith journey to this point? God's redeeming love is endlessly perfect. One irony of faith is that the more we grow, the more we realize our need to grow. There is no little red arrow or dot on the map that says, "You are here." Still, there are some things we are ready to take on, and some we aren't. The official word is that a Lay Speaker should be one who is "ready and desirous to serve the Church and who is well-informed on the Scriptures, doctrine, heritage, organization,

and life of the United Methodist Church and who has received specific training to develop skills in witnessing to the Christian faith through spoken communication, church and community leadership, and care-giving ministries. An applicant must be active in the support of a local church or charge.”¹ Whew! Got all that? Basically, it is saying that a Lay Speaker is an active church member who is familiar with how we as United Methodists work together in ministry. You should have a basic sense of our history and core beliefs, and be prepared to work in accord with them. The specific training part, since you are reading this, is likely well underway.

When you step before a congregation as a Lay Speaker, your audience will make some assumptions about you. They will presume that you are a committed Christian who has a solid grasp of the Bible and the Christian faith. They assume they can trust what you will say. If you look at these guidelines and know that this doesn’t click with where you are at, it’s OK to wait. If you have never given the Bible a closer look, either on your own, or in a Bible study group, give your energies to those areas, so that you can come back to Lay Speaker training ready to go. As we said, it’s an important role. If you feel the need to catch up on some of the areas above, such as our common history, check the “Read More” section below for some great resources.

You will be blessed, as well.

When we give freely of our gifts without asking in return, we often receive more than we have given. God is great! As this journey unfolds, here are some hidden blessings that you may suddenly come across:

You will understand the Bible better. The process of really getting and grasping the meaning of a text will open the door to a far deeper encounter with God’s word.

You will understand sermons better. Sermons will no longer be church speeches. You will be able to evaluate for yourself what a preacher was really getting at. You can sense how it was put together, and have a standard to apply. But be gentle! A gift of know-how is best used to encourage and celebrate the gifts of others.

Your own faith will be challenged and deepened. Despite our own struggles and weaknesses, God’s grace will work through us, and change us as we go.

¹ Lay Speaking Ministry in the United Methodist Church. Nashville: General Board of Discipleship, 2004.

You will be able to use your God-given gifts with greater confidence and poise. After all, confidence just means with-faith. You will build upon your faith in what God can and will do... through you!

How to use this book:

Reading this guidebook on its own will get you nowhere! It's designed to take you through the steps of writing your own sermon from the ground up. Run through it with a *text* from start to finish, and then run through it again with a different text. But before you do, make sure that everything in Chapter 3 makes crystal-clear sense.

The whole process comes down to getting that one, inspired Big Idea that is drawn from the text. No Big Idea, no sermon. It's all about the Big Idea!

The handiest part of this guidebook is that you don't have to go through the entire thing each time, just the parts that match your kind of text. If you are going to preach a Psalm, you only need to work with the guidelines for finding and building on the Big Idea with Psalms. That means the parts on all the other *genres*, or literary forms, can wait their turn.

A nice way to get nowhere...

It's all about the Big Idea!
Unless you have Chapter 3 down-pat, you won't get far at all. By the way, did we mention that it's all about the Big Idea?

Take advantage of the introductions and summaries at the start and finish of each chapter. It's nice to know what to expect. There are plenty of "Read More" options around, too. They were chosen not just because they will build on what you are doing, but also because they are geared specifically to Big Idea preaching. No sense trying to learn ten different approaches to preaching at once. Sidebars appear here and there to define some terms and keep you on course. Take one step at a time.

And once again, thank you for stepping into this vital role in the life of our church. Glad you're here!

WANT TO READ MORE?

Great books on preaching:

Craddock, Fred B. Preaching. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985.

Robinson, Haddon W. Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.

Robinson, Haddon W. Biblical Sermons: How Twelve Preachers Apply the Principles of Biblical Preaching. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989.

Stott, John. Between Two Worlds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

Chapter 1

Tools and study helps.

In This Chapter:

- +What versions of the Bible to keep around and why.
- + Research and study helps worth having.
- + Other resources.
- +Tools you may not have as a Lay Speaker.

If someone gives you a nice picture for your wall, you could probably hang it without any tools. Push hard enough on a nail and sooner or later it will go through the wall board. But the picture may be off-center, or soon come crashing down. And don't even look at your hands. Tools don't do the job for us, but they do save time, pain, and mistakes. A tape measure, a level, and a hammer help get that picture hung right.

So what tools do we use for preaching? There are thousands. But not all are really necessary, and not all work for everyone. Some cost big bucks, others are cheap, even free. The main question always is; will this help me get the job done? Here's a list to get you started:

Your bundle of Bibles.

If you have been a Christian for some time, you hopefully have a much-loved Bible that you are comfortable with. Sadly, it's not enough. You need more! Different translations work together with each other in order to help you see things in the text that might get missed. You don't need one of everything, but see if you can get:

1. One or two more strict, word-for-word versions like the Amplified Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, or the Interlinear. These hang on to the original languages as literally as possible.
2. One or two more balanced versions, like the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, the New Living Translation, or the New King James Bible. These balance tight translation with readability.
3. One or two more paraphrased, thought-for-thought versions, like the Contemporary English Version, The Message (now available with verse numbers), the Living Bible, or the Good News Bible. They help bring out the general meaning in modern terms.

Extra Bible versions are all around you. There may be a bunch just waiting in your church library for someone to use them, or leftovers on the wall of your pastor's study. There are also parallel Bibles that list several versions at once. These can be useful, as long as there is variety between the word-for-word and thought-for-thought. You might also come across Bible software that lets you read from several versions at the same time.

A Bible dictionary.

A good Bible dictionary is actually more like an encyclopedia. Details are important in the Bible, and very few are meaningless. Often the real meaning of a passage lies in how the details work with each other. Until you have really looked into things like names, places, and images of a passage, you can't be sure you have the idea of it.

Concordances.

Sometimes the best way to tell how a word is being used in a text is to see how it is used in others. Concordances give you all the places a word appears in the Bible. Remember that most concordances are specific to one version. So if you are looking at a word in the NRSV, you will probably need an NRSV concordance to find where else it pops up.

Commentaries.

Collecting commentaries is a lot like doing nothing; you never know when you're done. There are tons of them out there. And they all comment upon Scripture, but not all in the same way. Some are exegetical; they deal with what the words mean and how they are put together. Others are full of historical background, while some seem to wander in and out of the commentator's profound thoughts. Some are very useful, others not worth the time, much less the money. There are commentaries on the entire Bible

in one giant book, or separate ones that cover one or a few books of the Bible each. A volume that only deals with the book you are working with often gives a lot more of what you need. The only way to decide if a commentary will help your message along is to glance through it. Look for ones that give good background info, or seem like they explain things in language you can understand. Go for ones that read like a textbook, not like someone else's sermon. Pick commentaries that challenge you, but also that are not so super-brainy that you need a commentary for your commentary.

One last thing. Commentaries come from the whole spectrum. Some are very conservative, others way on the liberal side. That's fine...axes have to be grinded from both sides of the blade if they are to bite deep. Remember that you are looking for information. The views may challenge you, but they are just opinions about the text, not the text itself.

Word studies.

These are often more like a dictionary than a Bible dictionary is. They are a great way to find out the real meaning of a word, and how it is used. Sometimes, because they can list the places and ways a word gets used, they do the work of a concordance as well.

Other resources.

There's always more around than you need. The problem is finding resources that work. There are internet sites that have lectionary based study and sermon helps that range from the supreme to the nutty. Every bleary moment in front of the computer monitor would likely be better spent really going over your text.

A host of new Bible software has hit the market, ranging from a few dollars into the thousands. The high-end ones have lots of scholarship and Greek/Hebrew texts. You truly get what you pay for here. Even the cheaper ones that have commentaries within them only have the oldies that have become common domain. They often don't help much. It's better to wait until you are preaching regularly before investing in the prime CD-ROMs, leaving the cheap stuff in the discount bin.

Other materials are out there, especially if you are using lectionary texts. But many of these guides on preaching the lectionary don't really help you understand the text. They may give some insight, but more often they are concerned with how they relate to current events or the Christian year. If you let them apply your text before you even have its idea, they may only make your job harder.

Resources you may not have:

Not everyone is skilled in working fluently in Greek and Hebrew, clergy included. Abilities run the gamut. Going into the original language can reveal things about a text that the English translation doesn't get across.

Seminaries and the Local Pastor

Course of Study often give in-depth courses in the Bible and teach classes in hermeneutics. Remember though, that knowledge and skills are not always the same thing.

One goal of preaching is to bring the powerful and life-changing Word of God to this world. Tools may be handy, but it will be your prayerful preparation, working through your Christian character in love, that makes a sermon come alive.

Coming to Terms:

Hermeneutics: The science of interpreting a text, or finding its meaning as it moves from the Bible's context into our own. The word is based on Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods.

As a lay speaker, you are a precious part of our church connection, sharing your time and gifts for the blessing of the whole. All you can do is your best, with what you have available. Trust in the Lord, devote your energy to this ministry, work your way carefully through the chapters ahead. And the sermons will flow.

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS:

- + Study and reference materials can be helpful if you choose and use them well.
- + You will need several versions of the Bible, mixed between strict translations, balanced, and paraphrases.
- + You may not have every tool or skill, but who does? What matters is living out this ministry as a Lay Speaker with faithfulness and love.

WANT TO READ MORE?

Zondervan has a great website that gives guidance on different Bible translations at: <http://www.zondervanbibles.com/translations.htm>

A great book on reading the Bible with study tools:

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas, Stuart. How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth.
Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982.

Chapter 2

You've got to start somewhere!

Picking your text.

In this Chapter:

- + Ways to get your sermon text.
- + Understanding the lectionary.
- +Coming to a decision.

To write a sermon, you need to:

- 1. Pick a text from the Bible.**
- 2. Write a sermon on it.**

Sounds simple. But by now, I bet you already realize that writing a sermon isn't all that simple. Do-able, yes. Simple, no. But you can't get very far at all if you don't have a Bible text. Perhaps, for many of your preaching assignments, you will be given the text in advance, based on what the church is doing. Some churches follow the lectionary "religiously," and you have to follow it, too, or risk some kind of heresy. That narrows things down, but you still have to make some choices. Maybe you are flying solo, and the sky is the limit. You have no guidance whatsoever on what part of the Scriptures to preach on. Whether you have no choice in your text, a few choices, or all choices, it's still important to get things set up so that you have a text from which you can build a solid, biblical message. Let's take a look.

Finding a text somewhere in that big Bible.

There's no better way to realize how scary-big the Bible is than to start randomly reading it looking for a text to preach on. Even folks who have studied the Bible for years would feel overwhelmed. So let's not do that. Instead, let's just lay down some principles that will steer you on your way to a good choice in texts:

First, it's fine to start with what's familiar to you.

Do you draw a blank when you're looking at skin-gunk rules in the middle of Leviticus? You're not alone. Still scratching your head at Revelation? Join the club. Some passages in the Bible are easier to preach on than others.

Some would take far more explaining than time allows during a sermon. Is there a book of the Bible that you got really familiar with in a church Bible study? Maybe one that you have spent some time reading and making notes on? What are your favorite passages?

A nice way to get nowhere: Flitting from one text to another like a bumble bee on a busy day, hoping something will "jump out" at you, may give you some fresh contact with your Bible, but time's a'wastin. Truth is, you can put together a sermon on hundreds of texts. So choose or lose!

Don't worry that a passage may be so well-loved by either you or the congregation that it won't be worth doing again. When a church has a hymn sing, do the folks call out hymns they've never sung, or the old favorites? Remember, it is already unique and special to have *you* as the preacher. Stick with what you know.

Second, though the entire Bible is inspired, it is not all equally useful in all times and places.

Most church congregations are *general*/audiences. You have different genders and generations. Some are hurting, some are fine and dandy. But God is great! Somehow, though your message is on one idea, people from all walks of life will come up to you afterward and say, "That really spoke to ME." But if you are preparing a message that you can use in several churches, some of which you may not know very well, remember to seek out what will apply to their needs as best as you are able.

Different texts speak to different needs and levels of Christian maturity. Pick what will work for both you and your audience.

Third, limit yourself to ONE text.

Sometimes, very rarely, two texts can be used together for Big Idea preaching. Otherwise, the Bible-casserole approach needs to stay out of the kitchen. Even if the invisible masterminds who created the lectionary put those texts together for Sunday worship, each text still has its own unique idea, context, and meaning. Does your pastor mush them all together every Sunday? There are other methods of preparing messages that he or she may have been taught and uses each week. Enjoy! But for *your* message, stick to one. *Why* we use only one text will become very clear as we go.

A lecture on the lectionary.

What is the lectionary?

In short, “lectionary” just means “readings.” It is a cycle of recommended readings that work together with the seasons (Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany, Lent, etc.) and holy days of the Christian Year. Want to see it? It’s listed in The United Methodist Book of Worship on pages 227-237. You can also check it out online at:

<http://www.gbod.org/worship/lectionary/>

If you are looking at it, you can see that:

1. Each week has four readings; one from the Old Testament, one from Psalms, one from the Gospels, and one from the rest of the New Testament. There are exceptions. For example, after Easter through Pentecost Sunday, the Old Testament reading gets bumped to make room for Acts.
2. There is a cycle of three years (A,B,C) where nearly all the readings are different, except around Christmas and Holy Week. Each year focuses on a different gospel. Year A uses Matthew, B uses Mark, and C, Luke. John has to work his way in here and there in all three years, mainly in B since Mark is so short, he leaves more space open.

Wait! What year are we in?

What fun! Here’s a tip: REMEMBER DECEMBER. The lectionary year begins with Advent, which usually arrives right around December 1 each year, give or take a few days. So if Year A begins in Advent of 2007, remember that you are still in A for most of 2008 as well. Or you can just cheat and find out online...or even ask! Once you have the right texts for your Sunday, the year means nothing anyway.

Where did all this come from?

Well, we borrowed it. By Jesus' time, Jewish synagogues were using cycles of readings for worship and teaching. The Church did the same. It became more formal later on. Think about what a gift the Christian Year would be to someone way back when many couldn't read, or had no access to Scripture anyway. A person new to the Church would get a whole year that went through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Worship and learning went together, and in the three-year cycle they would get to know all four gospels, plus a lot of other important scripture.

The old lectionary has grown and changed over the years. There are a few different versions out there. The Catholic one is a bit different from ours. We use the Revised Common Lectionary, which has actually only been in use since 1992, once they had (you guessed it) revised the Common Lectionary.

What other good does it do?

It brings us together. Churches on the lectionary are often in step with each other. It makes it easier to get ahead. In the busy world of ministry, it condenses a lot of the week in, week out study for sermon writing to a set body of readings, with lots of helpful resources available. Plus, we can talk to other preachers who are working on the same text at the same time. Many churches have lectionary-based Bible study groups that work together with Sunday preaching. There are lots of advantages.¹

Is there a down side to all this?

The Lectionary isn't perfect...it's just a general guide. There are some things you need to look out for:

1. Sometimes the texts look like your newspaper after a fervent coupon-clipper has gone through it. Readings sometimes get cut short so they can fit time-wise, but the author's meaning gets cut short, too. Portions in the middle of the reading can get snipped because they don't get along with the others. But you need to preach the text as God's inspired author meant it to mean, not what the lectionary folks wish it meant.

¹ Diduit, Michael, Ed. The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching. Nashville: Broadman's, 1992. (pp. 240-243)

2. Texts can get misused in order to fit into their slot in the Christian Year. Micah was a mighty prophet, with a powerful message to his people that also applies to us today. But come across the Micah reading in Advent and it seems that the only reason he existed was to hint that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.

3. Using the lectionary all the time can interfere with great things like a sermon series on a particular Book or subject, and even with the Holy Spirit's own guidance, the most important of all. Yet, God's Spirit can and certainly does work in the midst of lectionary preaching.

4. You may feel that sneaky temptation to spend more time figuring out what the texts have in common, rather than what your one chosen text means on its own.

So, that is a lecture on the lectionary. It has its ups and downs. If you ever wonder whether to follow it or not, usually it just takes a moment to ask what the church prefers, and go with them. Gracious guests get invited back!

Time to decide.

Now it's up to you. If you are picking a text from the whole Bible, use the suggestions above to narrow your search. As you get more familiar with sermon-writing, you can try out different parts of the Bible, but for now, we need a winner. Don't just flip pages at random! Make a list of your favorite or best-studied books or passages on a scratch sheet. Pray a moment, then just circle one. If it's a general book, declare one part of it now. Narrow it to a particular story, or section. We will refine it into a preaching "unit" in a bit.

If you are using the lectionary, get the right readings for your Sunday. With prayer, read each one through. Don't neglect the Psalms...they are often great preaching texts, too. You don't need to read them with an eye for how you may go about preaching them. The text will make that call for you. No sparks need to fly.

And make your choice.

Make sure your text is a unit.

A unit of text is a portion of scripture that expresses one clear Idea. As you study your text, you may need to widen or narrow it as you go. Remember that the lectionary readings may not be units; they were edited for length and for suitability to the Christian Year. But you need to make sure you have the whole unit of thought, no more and no less. Here are some helpful hints:

1. Focus on the text, not the chapter and verse breaks. The paragraphs and headings usually show where the gears are shifting from one thought to the next. This is especially true in the epistles.
2. In narratives (stories), look for “time stamps.” The authors use words like “a few days later” or “one day, while...” to announce a change in the action. New times places, and characters usually mean new units. Also, stories in the Bible usually follow a basic pattern; setting the stage, a crisis/conflict, a resolution, and a conclusion. Once you can name those parts, you have your story, and your unit.
3. The poetry of the prophets often has opening and closing statements. “Thus says the LORD,” often opens a new unit, and “says the LORD,” often closes a unit. There may also be herald-type remarks like “Arise,” “Listen to me!” or “Shout out, O...” Compare several different Bible versions to see where they put paragraph and heading breaks.
4. Psalms are their own units. Some Psalms are very long and have subheadings. You can preach on one part, but make sure you research the overall theme!

Regardless of which text you are studying, working with one unit at a time is vital to keeping you on track.

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS:

- + Picking a text is rarely done by flipping through the Bible at random.
- + The lectionary has strengths and weaknesses...learn them!
- + Your text must comprise one complete unit of thought.

Chapter 3

It's all about the Big Idea!

In This Chapter:

- + What is a Big Idea?
- + What needs to be in it?
- + How do we go about getting one?
- + Practice runs for getting a Big Idea.
- + Understanding an author's intent while finding your Big Idea.

Still got the text you picked? Good! But put it aside for now. This is absolutely the most important part of this handbook. Stay here until the whole concept of the Big Idea is as obvious and necessary to you as brushing your teeth. You must have it. It's all about the Big Idea!

Every single sermon must be based on ONE central, well-written idea. The idea has to come straight from what the text really means. Not just part of the text, but the entire unit of text. It's the Big Idea. When someone comes upon you and says, "What's the Big Idea?" they are demanding to know what is really happening. They want to understand that one, driving reason for doing what you did or saying what you said. Let's begin with the basics:

What is an idea?

An idea is far more than just a thought, a mental blip. ***An idea is a meaningful connection.*** An idea draws together two or more things, different aspects of the universe, and sees how they fit and work together. The venerable Haddon Robinson puts it: "An idea, therefore, may be considered a distillation of life. It abstracts out of the particulars of life what

they have in common and relates them to each other. Through ideas we make sense out of the parts of our experience.”¹

An idea, then, takes separate things, and puts them together in a way you can use. A fellow wandering past tennis courts, who suddenly catches the sight of a fuzzy yellow-green ball whizzing toward his head needs an idea, and fast. His mind draws on other experiences of object impacts, pain, and avoidance tactics, and relates them all together: Unless I get out of the path of the ball, it will hit me and hurt...Duck!

Is this getting clearer? Every day, you have countless ideas, from preparing a dinner selection to picking a driving route. You are reconciling realities in your days and in your dreams, for once you connect things meaningfully, you can use them. You can act, feel, and understand. Most important, you can communicate an idea. You can take the idea in your head and (usually with words) share it with others.

So we have the idea. I see this, and I see that. Ahah! Now I see how they work together. Now I know what I can do with this, and that.

An idea connects different things...with meaning. But what goes into an idea that we actually CAN communicate? What are its parts?

An idea is composed of a subject and a complement.

This makes sense. Since an idea relates different things *together* with meaning, an idea can't be about only **one** thing, can it? It takes something (the subject) and shows how something else fits with it, or acts on it. That's the complement. Take a closer look:

The subject: What is the text about?

Basically, a subject is that which defines what a passage is about. Simple, right? What is this about? But don't go running off yet. Lots of times we declare our subject way too early, and have something vague that only gives a partial answer. That leaves us with nothing to work with. One way to avoid that is to ALWAYS do this:

Always write out the subject in the form of a detailed question.

It's important to do this because the very essence of a question; the who's, what's, where's, when's, how's, and why's keep you asking things about the text until you really get that subject defined. Putting the subject as a question will keep your mind working at it until you get it

¹ Robinson, Haddon W. Biblical Preaching. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980. (page 38)

just so. It must be a question, one that draws out what the text is really after. It is a question that has to invite a meaningful answer, not just a yes or no.

Let's try some out. This one will be pretty simple. Write the subject in the lines below it, remembering to put it in the form of a question:

Stan the computer whiz is in love with his new USB flash drive. That little gizmo is not much bigger than a stick of gum, but it holds as much data as a CD-ROM, and more! It is tougher than a CD as well, and he keeps it right in his pocket, so it goes with him everywhere. He just pops it into any computer, so all the projects he is working on are right there, and he can save them over and over without going through the trouble of re-burning a CD. The newer ones can hold 4 gigabytes, that's over 4 billion bytes of data. In a few seconds it can save every word of every book he's read in his entire life!

Subject: _____

Make sure you don't forget about Stan. The paragraph is about what he prefers, not what is better for everyone in general. If you got something like, "Why does Stan prefer his flash drive over CD-ROMs?" then you are right!

Again, go ahead and write down what you think is the subject of the hymn lyric below:

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful: the Lord God made them all.

Subject: _____

So what is the subject? What is the refrain of this old hymn really telling us? It seems to be listing, in the context of *praise and reverence*, the beautiful aspects of God's creation. So, though "what has God made?" may be technically right, we have to let it fulfill the reason it was written; worship. Look not just at what it says, but what it is trying to evoke. What is the passage trying to do? So, bringing out what the author wanted this verse to be about, without adding to it, a subject question would be:

“What is it about creation that can inspire us to worship God?”

Once the subject question is asked, we can already see how the rest of the verse will answer it. That will be the complement.

How about another? Read this short paragraph below, and pencil in the subject below it.

Gargoyles have to be one of the strangest facets of church architecture. It seems to make no sense that they would put something so ugly and fierce on something so beautiful as a cathedral. But I believe their function has something to do with it. They were designed to funnel out and toss corrosive rainwater away from the roof and foundation of the building. In a downpour, they heaved, sloshed, and “gargled” water out of their spouts. If you wanted to put a statuary form over what was basically an awkward-looking drainage tube, why shouldn’t it be something grotesque? After all, who wants to see a glorious angel heaving out a bellyful of dirty rainwater?

Subject: _____

Let’s nail down the subject of this paragraph. Is it “Gargoyles?” Remember, the subject must be in the form of a *full* question. Which interrogative (who, what, where, when, how, why) would work here? One could put the subject as “What do gargoyles do?” But that wouldn’t really cover it. A subject needs to address the *entire* paragraph. The real predicament is that gargoyles seem out of place. The rest of the paragraph addresses why they are not so out of place after all. So, a good subject question would read something like:

“Why were grotesque gargoyles used in church architecture?”

There will be plenty more opportunities to work on this as we go. But for now, here is what we really need:

A subject:

Addresses what a text is saying.

Is always first put in the form of a full, well-defined question.

Addresses the entire text, not just one part.

Can not be answered with a simple yes or no.

So now we have the subject down. Let’s look at the other half of what goes into an idea: The complement.

The complement: What is it saying about what it is about?

Don't run screaming from the room after reading that heading. It really does make sense. If the subject addresses what a passage is about, the complement has to answer it, to relate something to it, to say something about the subject. Unlike the subject, the complement does not need to be in the form of a question. The complement answers the question. Remember, though, that it isn't your answer to the question, but it is the author's answer that is the complement. To make sure it comes out right, always put your complement in a full sentence, even if it seems to overlap the subject. You can always refine it later.

Time to back track. Look at the first example, the one about Stan and his nifty flash drive. Now that we know the subject, write what you see as the complement below:

Subject: Why does Stan prefer his flash drive over CD-ROMs?

Complement: _____

There are lots of ways to word the complement. For now, it would suffice to put: "Stan's flash drive is more portable than a CD-ROM, easier to use, and most importantly, holds more data." That does some summarizing, but each part of it can be checked against the text itself to make sure it still works. It was condensed because some of the statements about having more memory were repeated, and were the biggest focus of the writer.

Turn back to the lines from "All Things Bright and Beautiful." Once the subject is clear, the complement should flow. But be careful to keep it as a sentence! Write the complement down below:

Subject: What aspects of creation inspire us to worship God?

Complement: _____

The temptation here is to just restate the whole verse. Technically, you could do that, but you will have missed the chance to wrestle with what those poetic words mean. If you were to speak on it, the audience would be no better off. So qualify what those lines mean. It is not easy because it is poetry, and poetry needs interpreting. What were the "bright and beautiful" things the author had in mind? Express it as a category. The

bright and beautiful would mean the grandeur of creation. Creatures great and small are the spectrum of living things. The wise and wonderful are hard to pin down. Though the rest of the hymn is not written here, it praises God's perfect ordering of the natural world, the way it makes sense. The wise and wonderful speaks of God's intelligent yet awesome design. So, a good complement may be, "The grandeur of God's creation, the amazing variety of life, and the awesome intelligence within God's design inspires us to worship."

Now do the gargoyle one. Write down the complement for its subject:

Subject: Why were grotesque gargoyles used in church architecture?

Complement: _____

Notice that you have to ponder this one for awhile. You have to wrestle around for the right words. Some fit, some don't. What was the writer's answer to that question? Although your own words may put it a different way, try: "The absurd, spewing function of a gargoyle is better suited to a grotesque figure than a beautiful one."

How did you do? There was an extra "twist" to each of those examples, and for a good reason. Your first answer is usually never your final one. When you are seeking the subject and complement, NEVER rush through it. A good idea is one that you have challenged again and again, refined and reworked, and basically wrestled with so well that not only is the idea clear, but the whole text is as familiar to you as your own address.

Let's move on to God's word. Work on each of the passages below until you can write the subject and complement:

Now for the reward.

Combining the subject and complement:

Once you have your subject (of course, always in the form of a full, detailed question) and your complement (which answers that question) you can snap them together. Connect the subject and complement, and you have an idea! A question and its proper answer can always be turned into a statement.

For example:

“Grotesque gargoyles were used in church architecture because the absurd, spewing function of a gargoyle is better suited to a grotesque figure than a beautiful one.”

or:

“Stan prefers his USB flash drive over a CD-ROM because his flash drive is more portable than a CD-ROM, easier to use, and most importantly, holds more data.”

This is pretty straightforward. Let’s review:

To Get a Text’s Idea:

First, write out the text’s subject (what is it talking about) in the form of a full, detailed question.

Second, write out the complement (what it is saying about what it is talking about) which answers the subject question.

Third, combine the two into one clearly written idea statement that expresses the full, intended meaning of the text.

There will be more practice on this later. For now, read on...

A Big Idea reflects the author’s intent.

What do we mean by “author’s intent?” Simply, it is the reason he or she wrote it. In the Bible, everything is written for a reason. The word of God was written to cause a change in the lives of the hearers and readers. Change! That is what communication is all about.

When you look at a text, keep searching until you have a clear sense of why the author wants it there. What was the problem that created the need to write it? What was the change in the audience the writer wanted as an outcome? Clues to the author's intent often come from the setting. Look at a text in its context. Picture this:

A father shares an old memory of a knee-wetting rescue operation to save the flopping victims of his son's mishap, which ruptured the family fish tank. What's the context? It means one thing if it's at a "roast" during his son's wedding reception. It's something very different if it is told during a father-son chat as a word picture to share a bit of paternal wisdom. Something different again if recalled in an angry argument.

For this reason, we need to be extra careful with stories in the Bible. Very rarely is the Big Idea simply to do what the hero of the story did. Just because David slew Goliath does not mean that we are to give each bully's head a rock knock then chop it off. Far more important is WHY the author used the story.

Sometimes the text itself gives clues. For example, the heading for the famous threefold lost sheep, lost coin, lost son parables in Luke 15 states very clearly the reason Jesus told them – the Pharasaic grumbling over the outcasts Jesus kept company with. Even better, a few chapters later, the parable of the persistent widow open with "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." (Luke 18:1 NRSV) That one is a freebie!

The intent behind other texts often is revealed in the preceding or following passages. Sometimes the theme of the entire book sets the context. Keep searching until you have a sense of WHY the author wanted the audience to encounter the text in the form it was crafted in.

Remember always that the purpose of each passage in the Bible is theological. In other words, it is about God, even if the name of God or Jesus is not even mentioned. The whole point of finding out the author's intent is to discern God's purpose for the text. Where God's purpose is, there also is God's power to transform lives.

Words don't float in a dark void. From our daily chatter to the powerful word of God, words are offered for a reason. They are put forth to cause a change, sometimes slight, sometimes earth-shaking. Find out why a text is there, and you are on your way to the Big Idea.

Your Big Idea may need to be generalized.

Not all situations that happened in Biblical times still happen today, but the principles still ring true. If your Idea is well-written, it will be concise and specific to the text. But if your Idea will span the centuries, sometimes it will need to be made more general, so it can apply today with the same truth and impact. Look at an example Big Idea from 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Subject: How does a mature Christian, who knows that idols are powerless, show Christian love when offered meat sacrificed to idols in the presence of those whose weaker faith may be damaged?

Complement: They should humbly set their own liberty aside and refrain in order to prevent harm to their more vulnerable sisters and brothers in Christ.

Idea: When offered meat sacrificed to idols in the presence of those whose weaker faith may be damaged, mature Christians, who know that idols are powerless, should set their liberty aside and refrain in order to prevent harm to their more vulnerable sisters and brothers in Christ.

That idea seems long, and it is. Today, we find few meat products that were offered to pagan deities. But we do have situations where a mature Christian could be indulging in something that does him or herself no harm, yet still can devastate someone clinging to faith. What about having an alcoholic beverage when there is a recovering alcoholic in the room? Seeing a violent movie in front of someone who has been physically abused? Ah, now the principle is emerging. What we are really after is something more like this:

Idea: When given the opportunity to do something that may be technically blameless, yet which may injure the faith of a weaker Christian, mature believers should abstain in Christian love in order to prevent harm to their new sisters and brothers in Christ.

Generalizing the parts of your subject and complement that are trapped in the time frame of the ancient world will help bridge that “historical distance” between the author’s world and your own. The easiest way to do this is to take a close look at your Idea, and circle the parts that are too specific to the text’s audience only. Then, carefully rephrase them. It will take work! Make sure your idea still embraces the heart of the message. Note above that this principle still applies to *mature believers*. It is not a general ethic for everyone. There were mature Christians both then and

now, and since the passage is directed towards them, it needs to stay with them. But we have an Idea that will not only preach; it is begging to be preached. How many solid, yet stagnant churches need to hear a passionate call from God's messenger to surrender their lofty liberties, to be that eternal difference to a lonely soul taking a first trembling step in faith? More general does not mean less powerful. It means more relevant.

Coming to Terms

Historical distance: The lack of common situations, customs, symbols and worldviews between our world and the ancient one that can be a barrier to understanding. In other words, it's the ways we are so different that we have to work harder to figure out what's going on.

Sometimes you will have it easy and your text will have a Big Idea that has no historical distance whatsoever. The temptation to be an utter blabbermouth is present wherever human beings are found. And every would-be blabbermouth needs to hear the word from James 3. If the Idea from a Bible story is well crafted to illumine God's intended change in the hearer, then there is usually little historical distance there, either.

As you can see, a megawatt of brain-power goes into getting the Big Idea written just right. The Big Idea is the cornerstone of the rest of the sermon!

Your Big Idea will always be redemptive.

We are broken! 100% of your audience will be people who need God's grace, whether they admit it or not. The author of that Scripture passage you have been studying had the same kind of audience...wall to wall sinners. But Yahweh is salvation! (Incidentally, that is the literal meaning of the Hebrew name that we translate as "Jesus") Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh, is our savior. The Bible tells of God's mighty acts of salvation. But even more, the Word of God works for our salvation! So, when we preach, we are partnering up with saving word/work of God.

When you hammer out that Big Idea, remember: Every Scripture was put there to deal with some aspect of our fallen nature¹, and by the work of the Spirit, to do something about it. So what is it? Why did the inspired author need to write that? Once we know that, we are miles closer to knowing what the true Idea is.

¹Chapell, Bryan. Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994 (pages 40-43)

So keep this on the front burner: Your Big Idea will need to bring out what Big Problem the audience had with God, and what God does to redeem it.

Your Big Idea will need to be refined.

The most strenuous, forehead-rubbing part of sermon writing will be the formation of this one, central Idea. It must be expressed in a crystal-clear, and memorable, way. Before you can develop your Idea into a sermon, you must have that one, perfect sentence. Again, make sure that it truly embraces your entire passage, and that it fits the author's intent. Once it is really well-put, the principle behind the text will stand out in vivid detail. This Big Idea is the gem mined from all your labor.

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS:

- + An idea relates two or more things together with meaning.
- + An idea has a subject (what the text is about) and a complement (what is it saying about what the text is about)
- + Always express the subject in a full, detailed question.
- + A complement supplies the text's answer to the subject question.
- + Combining the subject and complement forms the Big Idea.
- + The Big Idea always brings out the author's intended change for the audience.
- + A Big Idea is redemptive.
- + A Big Idea will need to be refined.

Chapter 4

Developing a Big Idea.

In This Chapter:

- + Why does an Idea need to be developed?
- + The developmental questions.
- + Relating author's intent to the audience's needs.

If you are from that pre-digital crowd born before 1990, the word “develop” brings to mind the acrid smell of photo lab chemicals and the excitement of eagerly flipping through a thick envelope of fresh 3X5's.

Although the picture was already captured the split second the shutter clicked, it wasn't in a form that could be viewed or passed around. Photos were developed from the negative based on the *purpose* of the picture and the *needs* of those who would get a copy. Portraits get run on soft-gloss paper, in sizes like 8X10 and wallets. Snapshots get the double-run 3X5's. Developing is a process that makes something usable for others.

When you are preparing a message, your text's Idea is like a photo still in the negative. It has to be developed in order to be handed out and taken home. And, just like pictures, the Big Idea of a text is developed by relating two things together:

1. The purpose of the text (what was the intended change in the author's audience?)
2. The needs of your audience. (How will they respond?)

Just how we go about this will become clear as the chapter moves on. Let's begin by looking at the tools we will use to relate #1 to #2. They are called the Developmental Questions.

The Developmental Questions.

When you express an idea, there are only three ways to develop that idea into something people can use. You can prove it, explain it, or apply it. That's it! (Well, you can restate it, too, but that's reinforcement, not development.) Your audience will have a response to your Big Idea, and to the points you use to develop that Idea. It is your job to look ahead and anticipate their reaction. Then you will know which way to develop the Idea. Let's look at each one in turn.

1. CAN YOU EXPLAIN IT?

I don't get it. What does this mean?
How did you get that idea from this material?

2. CAN YOU PROVE IT?

Is this true?
Can we believe in this enough to change our lives based upon it?
Why is this true?
How can I believe this is true when there are experiences in my life which seem to contradict it?
Can you help me explain why it is true to others?

3. CAN YOU APPLY IT?

So what?
What would this look like in my daily life?
How does this affect me?
What needs to change because of this?
What difference should this make?¹

Notice that there are subtle differences in the responses, but they all fit into these three general categories. Repeat them in your mind about 10 times to get them all fixed there forever.

Prove it. Explain it. Apply it.

These are the only ways to develop an Idea. For now, the key is to just know them. We will put them to use later.

¹ Robinson, Haddon W. Biblical Preaching. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980. (pages 79-99)

Matching questions to audiences.

Look at your Big Idea. What was the author's intent? In other words, what change did the author want to see happen in the audience? Get that purpose down to:

The intent of this passage is for the audience to go from _____ to _____.

Now compare that to what you know about *your* audience. Will they require the same change? What developmental question would come to their minds if you just walked up to them and told them the Big Idea?

Let's go out on a limb. Most of the time, your audience is going to ask "Can you apply it?" People want to see how a Biblical truth fits into their lives. But don't be hasty! Take the time to really place yourself in the audience's shoes as they listen to your message. How will they respond? Is something confusing, or likely to meet some resistance? If you want them to live it, they also need to believe it and see it clearly.

Now, based on your audience's needs, you can develop your idea.

Two paths to develop an idea: Inductive and deductive

Once you have your idea well-formed, the developmental questions become your tool for expanding it into an outline. But there are two general patterns an outline can work with. Let's look at them:

Inductive: This goes from specific to general. This, this, and this come together, and make that. The question posed in the subject is in the beginning. The complement is at the end. This form works well with stories, for how the story unfolds leads to a conclusion at the end. That's inductive. Because one has to wait for the big bang at the end, the inductive form has some spunky drama to it, and is often the way to go for preaching.

Deductive: This goes from general to specific. Since this is true, then so is this, and this and this. If you have several applications for your idea, and need to list and explain them one at a time, this is a good form. It puts the idea out there from the get-go, so there's less to keep the audience tuned in.

Inductive-deductive: This combo form poses the subject questions first, draws the audience through the way the text brings out the complement, then lists the implications of the complement to finish it off.

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS!

- + How you develop your text depends on the author's intent and the audience's needs.
- + Prove it, explain it, or apply it. Those are the three ways to develop an idea.
- + The overall pattern of developing your idea in your sermon can be inductive, deductive, or inductive-deductive.

Chapter 5

*Start in context,
Study in context,
Finish in context.*

In This Chapter:

- + What is a genre?
- + Why the genre of a text is so important.
- + What types of genres are in the Bible.
- + How to find out what genre my preaching text is.

What is a genre anyway?

“Genre” comes from the same Latin root as “genus,” as in genus and species. It just means type, category, or kind. In literature, whether in the Bible or anywhere else, a genre is the category of writing the author used to put down his or her thoughts. Different genres use writing in different ways. You are supposed to read them in different ways, too.

Imagine you are trying to decipher the setup manual for a new DVD system. Plastic baggies, twist ties, and wires with weird plug ends are all over your den floor. Although the average 7th grader would pop it together without a glance at the instructions, with great success, you are doing the noble thing and going through each blatant, mind-gouging

Coming to Terms

genre: (zhahn-ruh) A type or style of literature used in writing. Each genre has its own methods of putting together thoughts, different uses, and are read and interpreted differently.

step, one at a time. Follow the instructions, do it right, and we may actually get to watch a DVD sometime this week.

But imagine that (this may be a stretch) the setup manual was written in poetry. Deep, passionate, expressive poetry. The microchip folks wanted to share with you, the consumer, the heart-throbbing wonder of the digital world. Each profound line reads like a clue from *The DaVinci Code*. Poetry may be a great portal for inviting someone to experience the gritty essence of life, but for an instruction booklet, it's just not what the doctor ordered.

If you write something, whether it's a honey-do list, a sermon, or a letter to your pen-pal, you use a genre of writing. Take the letter. You write it according to the basic rules of letter-writing, and the reader at the other end already has the rules in mind. That does away with a lot of guessing games. They know who it's from, when it was written, and so on.

Why are genres so important?

You don't write a history text in Haiku, and you don't write a love letter in a legal format of rules and regulations. Try it and find out why! Sneak your grocery list into a book of contemporary poetry and artsy folk will try to figure out your deep, hidden message. But that's not what you meant it to do. Why? Wrong genre.

So the Bible, then, is written in genres. One genre tells the story of Israel's sacred history. Poetry gets used in several ways. Letters reach out across the miles...and centuries. And when someone picked up or listened to a sacred text, they recognized the genre it was in, and they read or listened with that in mind.

Because of this, we can't pop out sermons with a cookie-cutter approach. We have to study and interpret each passage within the game rules of the *genre* it's written in. The rules of writing and reading within each genre are more than just something to keep in mind while we study a passage; they determine HOW we go from text to idea, and from idea to sermon.

What types of genres are in the Bible?

There's a bunch! Don't worry about what they all mean right now. You can learn much more about each genre in turn as you prepare new sermons on texts that use them. Here's a list:

1. Narrative: All the story-based, history portions of the Bible. The gospels and Acts are a special kind of narrative.

2. Poetry: The Psalms, Job, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes. Much of the prophets are written in poetry, but they get their own genre. Poems also pop up here and there in other parts of scripture, such as the Song of Deborah in Judges 5.
3. Epistle: The New Testament letters, though they contain other genres within them sometimes.
4. Parable: Though part of the gospels, they deserve their own special genre. They make you scratch your head and open your eyes.
5. Proverb: Not all the book of Proverbs is proverb. There is some poetry in there, too!
6. Law/Code: The thou shalts, mostly in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.
7. Apocalyptic: Mainly the visions of revelation. But there's more! Let me supply someone else's well-thought list.¹

Daniel 2,7,8	Ezekiel 37:1-14	Zechariah 1-6
Isaiah 24-27, 56-66	Joel 2	Revelation 4-22
Matthew 24-25	Mark 13	Luke 21
1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11	2 Thessalonians 2	

8. Prophecy: Much of the poetry part is repeated here, but used differently.

So how do I find out what genre my text is?

Usually, it's obvious. If you are preaching on, say, Mark 1:14-20, the calling of the first disciples, then you have a straight story out of the gospels. Go to the narrative, and you're on your way. If you have one of the prophets, and your passage isn't listed as apocalyptic, go to the prophecy section. Most passages give themselves away. Sometimes there is overlap; poetry can be used to write prophecy, even apocalyptic. Some of the chapters to come also have tips to bump you to the right place if you get lost. Go ahead, take a look at your passage, and write down what genre it is.

Know where to go? Still got the scoop on the Big Idea set and clear in your head? Time to go!

Please turn now to the section of your text's genre.

¹ Diduit, Michael, ed. The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching. Nashville: Broadman, 1992. (p.379)

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS:

- + The Bible is written in several different genres (types) of writing.
- + Each genre has its own rules for writing and interpreting.
- + The 8 main genres of the Bible are narrative (story), poetry, epistle, parable, proverb, law/code, apocalyptic, and prophesy.
- + Once you find out which genre your text is, you can move to the right section to go to work on learning your text's Big Idea.

Chapter 6

Let Me Illustrate... Supportive material for your sermon

In This Chapter:

- + What makes a good illustration.
- + Where to find illustrations.
- + Pitfalls to avoid when choosing illustrations.
- + How to put illustrations in your sermon.
- + Introductions and conclusions.

Ever hear the same tired sermon illustration over and over? I was once a lowly youth minister at a church whose senior pastor had been in place 34 long years. The choir used to chuckle in their mustard-colored robes up in the loft whenever another one of the same old stories was dusted off and used yet again. Some kept an informal running tally, and were as eager as a contestant on “Name that Tune” to be the first to recognize the repeat offender, “Ooh! Ooh! It’s the one about the Duke of Wellington. No, wait! It’s the empty Easter egg story!”

Hey! You just got the point!

Let's face it, illustrations are essential. Colorless, bland sermons are about as useless as a sponge that never gets wet. Look at the story you just read. It's an illustration! And it's put there to give some "oomph" to a point, and here it is:

What illustrations you choose, where you place them, and how you use them will change the whole way people receive your message.

Illustrations are serious stuff. Use them well! They are not just for decoration. Let's use the preaching story to find out what makes a good illustration:

What makes a good illustration?

Tip 1: A good illustration should always build on a point.

Remember the whole chapter on how you develop an idea? You can only do so many things with an idea, right? You can explain it, prove it, apply it, or restate it. That little story, even though it came before the point, basically proved it in advance. The way the choir folk listened to his message changed because of the way he chose his illustrations. It happened to him - It could happen to you. Point proved.

A nice way to get nowhere...

It's so tempting! Toss in that extra long, tear-jerking story you heard without really making it develop a specific point, and you'll leave that Big Idea you worked so hard to get in limbo-land forever.

But beware! The story is not the point. The story builds upon a point. The "why" in using an illustration has to relate to your point. Ask yourself, "Here's my point. What is the audience going to think of it?" If you realize they are going to have the mental equivalent of "Whuh?" then illustrate in a way that brings it home for them, makes it make more sense in real life. If they are going to think, "Nice try, but that won't happen in our neck of the woods," then prove it can. Show where it has. Getting the idea? One more: if you think the point is powerful and meaningful on its own, but that it just needs to be hammered home, restate it. No, not just repeat it, restate it. Use a quote maybe, or something else that's powerful, something that just makes it stick. Vividly reword it. Never think restatement is the wimpy way out. And unless you want to be held responsible for Grandma Nettie's Sunday roast tasting like charcoal, you will never have time or reason to tell stories for every point.

If the folks in the pew can't tell HOW your illustration moves your point along, one of three things may have gone awry:

1. They just can't see the connection between your point and the illustration.
2. You never made your point clear, so they are playing "Pin-the-tail-on-whatever."
3. Something else in the sanctuary is more interesting than you, so everyone has tuned you out except Edna Enthusiasm in the second row. Welcome to preaching!

Remember, every illustration should build on a point.

Tip 2: A good illustration should relate to the audience.

Here's where the canned stuff like those big books of "great" illustrations or the old copies of *Reader's Digest* you never got around to recycling can leave you flat. Illustrations have to be fresh, and relevant. The older it is, the more likely folks have heard it. People today lose respect fast for something that smacks of copying someone else's thoughts.

Imagine someone hand-sewing two pieces of fabric together...carelessly. The needle swoops through the top piece, but often misses the bottom one before it pops back up for another loop, again, and again. It's going to fall apart. So will illustrations that don't pass through the COMMON EXPERIENCE of the audience. Your illustrations are precious because they tie God's Word to real life. *Their* lives. Sew through what's on their minds, in their memories, the things on their TV sets that make them forget they are holding the remote. It pays to know your audience. Think about what has happened to you that also happens to them. They won't care about what you are saying until you show how it relates to what they *already* care about.

That story that opened the chapter hopefully relates to you, the reader. Most of us have gritted our teeth while we had the same old tale told to us again and again. Many of us have sat through sermons that seemed about as fresh as the oldest condiment in your fridge.

So leave that old pickle about D.L. Moody's conversion from shoe salesman to evangelist in the barrel. Put the Footprints poem back on the wall. Make it relevant.

Remember, every good illustration builds on a point and relates to the audience.

Tip 3: A good illustration should grab the audience's attention.

The human attention span is shrinking like a lollipop with too many licks. We live in a fast paced culture where images and information are coming at us all the time. The TV writers and internet page designers are doing our thinking for us...a bare few seconds of boredom and we are clicking our way to greener pastures. Minds wander off. Don't let them!

Truth is, you will have to re-engage the attention of your audience several times during your message. Very few will follow you the whole time. Some things definitely help, like great eye contact, changing pace and voice inflexion, good gestures, etc., but here is where illustrations come into their own. An illustration that is vividly worded, has some drama and tension to it, and relates to them is an automatic reset button on the bore-o-meter. It re-connects the audience to you as a person, to your message, to each other. Illustrations add energy and passion. A good illustration makes you part of the home team.

Remember, every illustration should build on a point, relate to the audience, and get their attention.

Where do you find good illustrations?

They're everywhere! The first place to look may well be the ideas that floated up in your mind while you were asking the questions needed to develop your points. The brain is *designed* to make connections. That's what an idea is, after all; a connection that puts two things together meaningfully. When you move from point into illustration, the brains of the audience are already trying to figure out what the connection between your point and illustration are. Satisfy that need. What are the developmental questions you think the audience will raise to each point? Pick things that will answer them. Your job is not just to plop the illustration in their laps. You have to sell it, to demonstrate clearly WHY this develops your point in the way you wanted to. Now they have power! So where do you find them?

Experiences and events:

Tell of something that happened, and guess what you've got? A story! And stories are great ways to build on a point. A story that has a reason to be told already carries a built-in lesson.

Stories are *inductive*, meaning that they take what happens inside of it and lets you use it somewhere else. A story is portable truth. Don't look for stories that just relate to the general theme of your sermon. Find ones that move your specific point along. If the subject of your big idea is "Where can we find spiritual contentment?" you don't need a bunch of anecdotes about people finding contentment. Ask yourself, "If I watched this story happen, what would I learn?" Stories lead to a truth, and that's what develops your point, if you are using it carefully.

Coming to Terms

Inductive: Taking something particular and making it more general, so it can apply to many things. Ex: Hey, did you hear that the Johnson kid got caught throwing a shopping cart off the bridge? Yeah, I heard. I guess we'll all need to keep a better eye on our kids these days.

Stories that relate to your points are happening all around you. What caught your attention this week? Stories are everywhere. The skunk that spread your garbage for the whole neighborhood to see. The hooligan who broke the head off the camel on the town's nativity scene. A surprising realization about a scene in the stained glass window. The sleek, springy feel of the new school running track. Breathe fresh insight into the experiences of your common life. Stories can be funny or sad, inspiring or troubling. Use what proves, applies, explains, or restates your point.

News and current events fit into this category as well. But the closer to home, the better. An experience in a food pantry nearby may teach more about the need for compassion than news of a famine a world away.

Keep your stories and events crisp and lean. Don't ramble. Use surprising, descriptive terms that help the audience visualize. Make sure your stories have a dramatic edge, a conflict that gets resolved. Stories are often your greatest asset. Think of the preachers you love to listen to. Can you think of one of them who *isn't* also a great storyteller?

Quotes and references:

Some quotes, if the author is well-respected, can help prove a point. Some restate your point in a fresh or powerful way. Some quotes can even apply, by showing how the relevance of the point was declared through someone

else's own words. Some quotes are merely stories in disguise. But the essence of a quote is brevity. They should express one idea only. Only venture into someone else's words for the few brief seconds it takes to serve your point, and get out before you get lost in them. I have heard that super-long quote of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letter of advice to a young, soon-to-be-wed couple in enough wedding sermons to gasp in horror each time it comes back. Great to read, not-so-hot as a quote.

Facts and statistics:

Like minced onion flakes, use these sparingly, or they'll just take over. Since facts and figures bring the thunk of finality, you will need to use them differently. I recommend using them dramatically, to raise questions rather than answer them. Remember, your point is already the answer. Illustrations are just supportive material that gets you to it. Be careful that your source is solid, and give them credit for it. You don't need the full bibliography, but you need to make it clear that it's not yours.

Engaging the Scripture:

Remember how Big Idea preaching works. Your text controls what your idea is, and how it gets developed. Dramatically present what it would be like to be a certain character in the passage. Help them discover what they need to understand how the text builds on the idea. Sometimes the best illustration of the text, IS the text. God's word is inspired, powerful, and true. Let them see that, and they'll see the point you got from it, too.

Got enough? Be creative! Remember, illustrations are everywhere. But that doesn't mean all are equal. Here are some places you *don't* want to go.

Pitfalls to avoid when choosing illustrations:

Beware of passing off a secondhand story as your own. Frame it the way it belongs. Repackaging without giving credit usually will get you in trouble.

Watch your facts. Verify before you speak. Misquote a date and there will always be a history buff there to catch it. Each gaff lops off a big chunk of your integrity.

Be super-careful to never drag someone into your very public story who doesn't want to be there. Never allow your family and friends to be embarrassed by or feel hijacked by your illustrations. Don't violate privacy or trust. When in doubt, leave it out.

Don't pitch politics, especially if it doesn't directly develop your point. We all dread the preacher who can use ANY point in the universe as a means to scratch their pet issue or pass their hot potato. Remember, illustrations draw together, not blast apart.

Look out for personal illustrations that portray you as super-person, or on the other extreme, those that drag in your own baggage. Both take away from the point you need to build on.

Be sensitive to the situations people may be facing. Poking fun at a marital spat may break the heart of someone clinging to hope in their own marriage.

Avoid off-color, sexist, or racial content, no matter what. That should be obvious. But the off-color line has some fuzzy boundaries. I once went out on a limb using a humorous observation about bedpans being re-used as decorative flowerpots. No problem, right? That limb snapped, and down I went. Stay on solid ground.

How to put illustrations into your sermon:

First, get your outline in front of you. Got it? Go over your points, one at a time; sub-points, too. Do a double-check. Are they all complete ideas? Do they make their connections? Put them together. Do they prove, explain, or apply the Big Idea? No sense feeding a goldfish that's floating belly-up. Inconsistencies in your flow of thought often become visible as you illustrate. Get a feel for your outline again. What are your key points, and based on what you expect from your audience, how do you need to develop them?

Also, give a thought to where the draggy points might be. Where would you just have gone through an explanation that would build some ear-fatigue? Put some asterisks in areas of your outline that may feel weak and heavy-laden.

This is your call, now. It's time to parcel out what type of illustration needs to go where. Go easy. There can't be a story for every point. That's overload. Plus, stories seldom explain confusing points. They just temporarily make you forget feeling confused. If you can only do one or two story-type illustrations, which places do you feel they can do the most good? What places need some restatements to drive the point home, and which need more explanation? Where is the text itself doing the job, but just needs to be brought to the audience in a powerful way? Not everything needs to be illustrated. Overdo it and in a flash you'll have 17 minutes of illustration for a 15 minute sermon.

If you have a point that needs some proof, you will need to bring in some research. Use supportive material that both works and relates.

If you have a point that needs to be restated or applied in a vivid way, maybe a story would do it. Stories reveal truths. What have you seen lately that brings forth a truth that develops your point in the way you want it to? Does it relate to the audience's own experience? Is it something that would best serve the point by being serious, or should it have some passionate power? Would a moment of honest levity serve the point and draw the audience together? Answering these questions a little bit at a time will help draw you closer to finding the illustrations you need.

Remember, you are not looking for artistic perfection. You want utility. You want the text to speak its message through you, not to pridefully blow people away with your goodie bag of oohs and aahs. The Gospel is already far beyond beautiful. Humbly trust God's word before your own cleverness. It is astonishing what flickers of insight and illumination God will grant to those who take the time to ask.

Introductions and conclusions:

Let's keep this very simple. No matter how you open your sermon, from "I'd like to begin by telling you about something that happened to me one day..." to "Hey! Check this out!" an introduction should do three things:

1. Introduce the subject of your sermon.
2. Get people's attention.
3. Attach the message of your sermon to a need.

It's the third one that is so often overlooked. People will listen to a sermon when they are sold on the idea that it will address a need they have in their life. And the need can't be simply "They need God, or Christ." It has to be a felt need. Loneliness. Fear. Frustration. The introduction awakens their awareness of the need, and establishes that yes, this sermon is relevant. So, choose your introduction not because it's cute, touching, or funny, but for how it convinces people that their needs are about to be met. If it meets no needs, why not just skip it and go home?

An introduction doesn't have to be a long story. In fact, beware of going more than a minute or two in your intro. Sometimes, for dramatic effect, or a sense of unity and closure, you can start a story, get to the crisis, tie it to the scripture's idea, and then come back to the story for the conclusion.

A conclusion should always restate the Big Idea, and drive it home as you want the audience to remember it. The biggest problem we have with conclusions is that they go on too long. Steer clear of devotional stories, or long poems. Anything that makes your audience recognize that you are concluding (and by the way NEVER say "In conclusion..") and then frustrates them because you are still going five minutes later is a no-no. When you conclude your message, be sure it is uplifting, empowering, and encouraging. End on a high note. If a challenge is offered, let it be something with some concrete steps to take in response. Always leave a pathway home!

DON'T MOVE ON WITHOUT THIS:

- + Good illustrations should build on a point, relate to the audience, and get their attention.
- + Good illustrations are everywhere. They can be stories, events, quotes, facts, and even the text itself.
- + Always test whether your illustration hits one of the pitfalls mentioned in this chapter.
- + Deciding what illustrations to use where comes from an honest look at your outline, one step at a time.
- + A good introduction introduces the subject, gets attention, and attaches the idea to a need.
- + Use conclusions to restate and drive home the Big Idea, but then sit down before you bury it again.

Chapter 7

Narrative (story)

It's story time!

We live in a story culture. When we turn on the TV, or pick up the phone, we start sharing stories. We can use a good tale to make a point, and to connect to others. Stories are the tethers of community.

But in the Bible, stories are something more. They reveal the very nature of God! Not just by what the stories mean, but also by the fact that the stories are there in the first place. God is involved in our history. God's story is our story. Because we have a God whose story overlaps ours, it becomes only logical for God to come in the flesh, and save us in the midst of our story. Truly, the Gospel story of the coming of Christ is "the greatest story ever told!"

Break it down before it bogs you down.

If you are here, you likely have a Bible story in front of you. It may be from Genesis, Judges, John, or anywhere in between. After you have read it closely in a few different versions, its best to begin by splicing it down into the basic elements of a story's plot: Exposition, crisis, resolution, and conclusion.¹

Take a look at the worksheets on the next two pages. You may want to photocopy them so that you will have fresh ones next time.

Matthewson, Steven D. The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002. (pages 43-47)

Preaching on Narrative Worksheet 1

Text:_____

1. Exposition (Describe the setting):

2. Crisis (Write the obvious part first, then come back later and put down the real, spiritual crisis):

3. Resolution (How does it turn out? What is the redeeming work or intent of God?):

4. Conclusion (Does the author make any claims?):

Preaching on Narrative Worksheet 2

Text:_____

Identify the characters:

- 1. Who was the protagonist (the main character)? Why?**

- 2. Who or what is the antagonist (the one working against the protagonist)?**

- 3. Is there a foil (secondary characters who “build up” the main character) in this story?**

- 4. Who were the minor characters and what roles do they play?**

Research the names and places in the story. Write your findings below and on the back of this page. Research those proper nouns! Describe what significance you think these details have for the story.

Context: What comes before and after this story in that book, and how do they relate to it?

What is the theme(s) of the whole book?

The Divine is in the details.

In stories, the meaning, and therefore the Big Idea, arises from how the pieces all fit together with each other, and with the larger context. But the Idea in a Biblical story is how God acts to make a difference **AMIDST the crisis. What the protagonist does when faced with the crisis is not the automatic Idea.**

Remember, find what the author is declaring about God's action in the midst of the crisis.

The crisis should also be narrowed to a spiritual problem. Ultimately, the Bible is the story of our salvation. We were lost. God saves. The sub-stories always have a spiritual kick. At the heart of the crisis is a warped relationship with God, and the resolution somehow brings out God's saving work, or intention. Bible stories illumine God's holy character, and the holes in our own characters.

The subject of your Big Idea can often be the true spiritual crisis, and the resolution/conclusion can become the complement.

Let's take a simple story from the Bible, found in Luke 19:

Jesus and Zacchaeus

19 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."¹

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville*

This is a powerful passage, and one many of us remember from Sunday School. "Zacchaeus was a wee little man..." Our observation of the passage gives the details that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. Research into that title tells us that tax collectors were despised as turncoats on their own people for the Romans, and they were usually dishonest, as they had to make their salary by collecting more than the empire demanded. A tax collector was distanced from the people, cast off from the inside pecking order of honor and standing in the community. Zacchaeus was in Jericho, and after hearing that Jesus was coming.

The protagonist is Jesus. Luke begins the story with Jesus, and introduces Zacchaeus a second later. Zacchaeus was the foil, since his actions built up and drew out an aspect of Jesus' character. The crowd, obviously, is the antagonist. They were murmuring against Jesus for offering to honor Zacchaeus with his gracious presence, and with Zacchaeus for accepting. Back then, if you were important, and accepted someone's hospitality, you were honoring them! The crowd murmured because they wanted old Zacchaeus raked across the coals, not embraced. The image of murmuring goes back to the Israelites in the wilderness, grumpily murmuring in opposition to God's plan. It is symbolic of resisting God's intentions.

As a person with a knowledge of both the Jewish and Roman law, he knew that the Jewish law was gentler. It required that dishonest money be repaid in full, plus an extra one-fifth. The Roman law demanded four times the amount one had swiped. He chose the toughest punishment; the more brutal Roman system in the process of his salvation. When we think about it, so did Jesus, who chose the ultimate brutality of the Roman cross in his process of bringing salvation to the world.

Zacchaeus' choice of the harsher reparation showed the fullness of his change of heart. So, the real essence of the passage is the crowd contesting the possibility that one so far gone as Zacchaeus could be so completely restored and accepted by Jesus. Ahah! Now we are getting close to our Big Idea.

Subject: Under what conditions can God forgive even the most extreme sinners?

Complement: When repentance is complete and sincere.

And if we combine the two: There is no limit to who Christ can forgive if repentance is genuine and complete.

That should preach!

Some parting tips on preaching from narrative:

1. Details are important in narrative passages. Bible stories are bare-bones when it comes to flowery fine points. When one is given, there is always a reason. Either it makes a difference in how the story is heard or it hearkens to something else for added meaning.

2. When you are preaching from a narrative, give yourself more time to involve the audience in the story. Pull back from adding too many story illustrations that over-story the story.

3. Stories are by nature inductive. The partial details create a full message at the end. Keep your sermon outline inductive as well. Share the subject early, then show how the story brings out the complement as it unfolds. If the story does *not* prove the complement, take a fresh look at your idea statement.

4. The scripture has been read before you start to preach. Therefore, when you move through the story line of your passage during your message, you do not need to speak it all again. Keep to the major movements and insights, connecting the experience of the characters in the story to the audience's experiences often.

5. Remember to start and end in the present. Suffice it to say that people care little about what happened to Abraham, but they will care about it's impact on what is going on in their lives.

6. Stories convey truth while holding interest. Pare your message down to do the same. The folks in the pews love a good story!

Chapter 8

Poetry

In this Chapter:

- + Understanding Hebrew poetry.
- + Common types of Psalms.
- + A method for studying Hebrew poetry
- + A sample Psalm analyzed.
- + Additional advice on preaching from the Psalms.

Poetry: Don't knock it till you've tried it!

Across our connection, the Psalter is getting shrugged out of our worship services. Dropping the Psalm can be silent victory for a pastor who wants to build some good faith with a congregation by keeping the service to an hour. Few notice it is gone, or miss it if they do. The Psalms are viewed as an add-on to old, yellowing bulletins in the file drawer; part of a routine of worship from a time when no one had to rush out of church to get the kids to the soccer game on time.

Perhaps we have failed to give Psalms their due credit. Any item of worship becomes meaningless if you just tolerate it and move on to the next thing. Hebrew poetry has often been given the cold shoulder from the pulpit as so no-duh simple they don't need to be the focus of a whole sermon. Far from it! The Psalms are a vital part of the Word of God, a beautiful display of the Godly genius of the Hebrew culture. Just because the rules of composition between Asaph and Wordsworth changed does not make the ancient ways invalid. The important part is to learn those rules. Then we can see how Hebrew poets laid their building blocks of meaning. Two things will happen; we will learn to delve more deeply than the passing glance, and we will discover profound truths that are crying out to be preached to the world.

Some common types of Psalms:

There are tons of scholars out there who each have their own system for figuring out which Psalm is which. It's like going through the Hymnal in the church pew and trying to boil down all the hymns to a few categories, and decide which hymns go in each. Some would fit in several at a time.

Psalms are like that. They emerged over centuries. There's lots of variety. Still the four most basic are: ¹

1. Praise: Bet you figured that one out already. Within this type are lots of sub-types, all focusing on different things. Some praise God for creation, some are meant for worship in or on the way to Jerusalem. Others are hymns of trust or thanksgiving. Some are personal songs of praise, others try to involve the whole community. With a praise psalm, once you establish exactly why the psalm declares we should praise God, you have the beginning of your Idea.

2. Lament: These sad, soulful psalms are hard to miss. Rarely do they leave you in the sackcloth and ashes, though. Most take the reader through a cycle of grappling, crying out to God, asking for something in particular. They often conclude with a renewal of trust, and a vow to praise God. You don't want to spin off on your own tangent with these. The spiritual process the psalmist carries you through is the message of the Psalm, but it needs to be crafted to the uniqueness of your psalm in particular. Like the Psalms of praise, laments can be one-on-one with God, or can call the whole crowd on in.

3. Royal Psalms: The king! There's some historical distance already. We don't want any kings around. But they do translate well to leaders, and remind us that just as power is a trust, so also those in power over us are a sacred trust, needful of our prayers and encouragement.

4. Wisdom Psalms: Take Psalm 1 as an example. These contrast different states of being. Holiness and wisdom are overlapped. Look for "Blessed is..." or the modern-day "Happy is..." These psalms make fantastic preaching material. Often there are powerful contrasts that draw bold lines in places that life tends to scuff and erase.

Why? What does the psalmist say about God that enables the grinding shift from lament to renewal of trust?

Images are mental pictures. And you know what they say about a picture...it's worth a thousand words. Research those images. They often carry the weight of meaning for the poem.

¹ Bellinger, W.H, Jr. Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1990. (pages 18-21)

One helpful method of studying Psalms that I worked up is to streamline the message into your own words. Let's start with a sample: (Psalm 54 NRSV)

Psalm 54

Prayer for Vindication

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Maskil of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, "David is in hiding among us."

¹ Save me, O God, by your name,

and vindicate me by your might.

² Hear my prayer, O God;

give ear to the words of my mouth.

³ For the insolent have risen against me,

the ruthless seek my life;

they do not set God before them. *Selah*

⁴ But surely, God is my helper;

the Lord is the upholder of^a my life.

⁵ He will repay my enemies for their evil.

In your faithfulness, put an end to them.

⁶ With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;

I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.

⁷ For he has delivered me from every trouble,

and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.²

^a Gk Syr Jerome: Heb *is of those who uphold* or *is with those who uphold*

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville

What kind of psalm is this? A quick look at the list of types, and we see it is a lament. We know it is going to take us through a cycle of lament and renewal.

Notice that much of the psalm is in two-line couplets. That is one of the most common facets of Hebrew poetry. Not only does this device slow the hearer down, but each part of the couplet is slightly different. They work together to give a fuller meaning. Sometimes it is contrasted, other times the second “tweaks” the first and gives it extra punch. Sometimes they say the same thing in different, artful ways. One part of a couplet can be more outward, behavior based, and the second part may be more inward and emotional. That’s beautiful! It gives the reader both Technicolor and X-ray vision. Go through each couplet, one at a time, and write down what you think the second part is doing to the first.

Once you have a real feel for the couplets (though sometimes there are three or four parallel lines) draw > marks from them and summarize in your own words. If you hit an image or a proper name, research it until you can see how it plays as an image in the psalm. Never bypass terms like “Hermon” or “cedars of Lebanon.” They are heavy hitters. In this Psalm, the heading describes the Ziphites, southern Palestinian folks under David’s early, fragile reign that had taken Saul in as a rejection of David. Can you smell a fight? This is given as a situational basis of the psalm, but we recognize that the accuracy of these headings is still debated. It may or may not be true, but the theme of the psalm works for many such situations, when those who undermining God’s will are looming on the horizon.

See the “Selah?” Though the precise meaning of that term has faded over time (they mean some kind of interlude), we can see it is used as a sink-in point. The defining issue that turns the lament over to a renewal of trust is that the writer comes to full realization that his enemies “don’t set God before them.”

Hebrew poetry works from the belly out. The critical shift, or anchor point is often in the middle.

Also, notice the changes in tense and voice. In verse 5, the psalmist switches from talking about God, to addressing God directly. This can symbolize a sort of reconciliation, a rekindling of the relationship. So, let’s move to an idea:

Subject: When we are faced with a crisis because of our obedience to God, what is the basis of our hope?

Complement: Our hope is based on the truth that, if our heart rests in obedient trust in God, we have already prevailed, regardless of outward appearances.

Some parting advice on preaching poetic texts:

1. If you are preaching from poetic books like Job and Song of Songs, remember that the passage you are studying is just one movement on the way to the conclusion at the end. Be careful not to take one message out of its context. An example of this would be one of the speeches of Job's friends. They are all beautiful, but according to God at the end, they were all wrong!
2. The headings at the beginnings of several Psalms allude to other stories in the Bible. Although they may be useful to consult, remember to focus on your text. Let the poetry carry its own weight. Do not allow your Psalm to be co-opted by the Bible story it may or may not relate to, turning your poem sermon back into a narrative sermon.
3. Although no one really knows what "Selah" means (probably a pause for silence or musical interlude), we can use them well. They never need to be read aloud from the pulpit, but they are valuable in the study. Often they mark a moment when a major point of meaning has just been given, and are giving a moment to let it sink in. Sniff around them to see what's up.
4. Here's a big word, so take it with courage: anthropomorphism. It just means giving human or animal characteristics to the spiritual. God has no arm, no ear, no mouth, no wings, no hand, for God is Spirit. But this is a common literary device from Hebrew poetry. It is the message of the image, not the image itself, which is truth.
5. Fill your poetic sermon with vivid, emotional examples, but keep them brief. Make it your mission for the audience to feel what it would be like to be in the psalmist's place.
6. Psalms express the gut-twisting, soaring realities of living as a human being, tossed by the world, yet passionately in love with God. There is a wild freedom to poetry. Don't over-analyze in your message. Your careful research was to get your idea. But the audience doesn't need to see your findings, only to soar with your message, charged with life. Let the dominant images and turning points come out, and just brush the rest. Line-by-line preaching of Hebrew poetry is a guaranteed snooze-a-thon.

Chapter 9

Epistle (Letter)

In this Chapter:

- + Understanding epistles.
- + The building blocks of an epistle.
- + Analyzing an epistle.
- + A sample Idea process from an epistle text.
- + Additional advice on preaching epistle texts.

Dear John...and Paul and Timothy and Titus and you Galatians...

Going to your mailbox is a drag these days. Junk, junk, and more junk. What a rare lift it is to flip through the mail and feel the joyful jolt of getting a letter from a loved one. What a blessing! And with all the high-speed, low-thought emails zipping through the cyber zone, good letters are scarcer every day.

What makes a letter so precious? Writing a letter is a way of being there when you can't be *there*. Through a letter, someone can override the limits of time and space and maintain, or even build a relationship. Sometimes a letter can even be *better* than face-to-face conversation. If you are sifting through a tough conflict, writing a letter slows things down. Words are chosen carefully, and the sender can finish his/her full argument. In person, the receiver may have cut in with a retort at the first hint of accusation. A final benefit of letters is their enduring nature. Real life conversations are quickly forgotten, but a letter can be passed along.

Letters dominate the New Testament. They were the perfect, God-ordained means of capturing the life and relationships of the early church from the inside. Can you imagine if all we had was narrative? "And Paul told the Corinthians to celebrate the Lord's Supper more appropriately..."

Remember; letters maintain the bonds of fellowship. God may have ordained their use as Holy Scripture, but perhaps one reason why is the expression of real Christian relationships they contain. The Epistles are so much more than information about God that happened to be sent through the mailbox. Letters demonstrate how we relate to each other as part of the Church universal.

Though the particulars change across time and cultures, letters have predictable forms. If we were looking at a modern personal letter, and wanted to know the date it was written, our eyes would drift to the top-right of the page. The New Testament writers had inherited the form for a letter in their own day, and they used it. But they tinkered with it a bit, making it serve the purposes of the Church. For example, they took the flowery, butter-you-up part that was common at the beginning, and changed it into a prayerful thanksgiving to God, who actually deserves all the glory. They Christianized the standard epistle.

According to most scholars, not all letters are epistles. Classic epistles have a set format, which we will go into later. When you look at the letters in the New Testament, it will be pretty easy to see which of them has missing parts.

But what are the parts? Let's take a look:

The building blocks of an epistle:

1. Opening: Unlike today's letters, the sender is listed first. This actually makes more sense. Then the recipient is named. But don't just glance at the opening and keep moving. Think for a minute about how the sender describes himself. When Paul declares himself an apostle, he is laying claim to some serious authority, which he will be using later on in the letter, you can be sure. If he calls himself "a slave for Jesus Christ," something in that self-lowering motif will pop up later on. The opening often has clues to the tone and theme of the whole letter!

2. Thanksgiving: Meetings for Christians should always open in prayer. So should a meeting of minds through a letter. But the prayers were more than generic praises to God. The writers used them to line up in God-vision the issues that the letter would address. They foreshadowed what would come, and swaddled their logical bricks in blankets of prayer.

3. Body: That's pretty predictable. This is where the formal argument takes place. Pay attention to how the author unfolds his argument. Structure is as important as content.

4. Exhortations: That's an old-sounding word that just means pushing someone to do something, or stop doing something. Figure out what the author gave away in the body of the letter that shows the reason why people are being given those particular exhortations.

5. Conclusion: Once again, the typical "Hope to see you soon," and "Say hello to so and so," are recast in a Christian motif. Paul, in particular, uses the closing to reinforce the necessity of love among Christians and our eternal communion.

Looking at your text:

After reading your text in several versions, try and map out the flow of the argument. What is connected to what? Draw some arrows. Look for summary statements. One rule of thumb is, if you find a "therefore," don't quit until you understand what it's there for. (Especially if the "therefore" is the first word of your text!) Look for flows of thought that raise an issue, bulges in the middle with the defining truth, then eases back with implications that resemble the first part, but changed in light of the truth. Jewish-influenced writing often puts the critical material, the deal-maker, in the center.

Epistles don't force you to interpret vague, poetic images. They don't make you scratch your head wondering if what the hero of the story just did was the Big Idea of what we should do. But they do demand that we pay attention to the flow of the argument.

When you see it unfold, you must take the time to understand *why* the author wrote what he did, not just what he wrote. When you know the why, then you have the author's inspired intent. You know that the audience need to change from this to that. Your audience will likely need the same change, and the power of God at work in the text can get to work through you, and your message.

Let's take a look at a sample text from the epistles: (1Cor.8, NRSV)

Food Offered to Idols

8 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge;³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.”⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.⁸ “Food will not bring us close to God.”^a We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.^b¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family,^c and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling,^d I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them^e to fall.

Ouch! A whole chapter! But that’s what it takes to get our unit of thought. It’s only 13 verses, though. Let’ make some observations about the passage:

In 8:1, Paul introduces the topic, and then gives the main principle that he is going to apply to the situation; knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

As Paul weaves through his argument, he offers back to the Corinthian church some of the common catch phrases being passed around. We know from the context of the rest of the book that the church was pretty high on the hobbyhorse about all the gifts of the Spirit they thought they had, but they were pretty shallow in the department of obedient love for God. There was a laundry list of issues for Paul to deal with, but Paul saw one common thread passing through them all; the failure to love.

^a The quotation may extend to the end of the verse

^b Gk *the weak brother . . . is destroyed*

^c Gk *against the brothers*

^d Gk *my brother’s falling*

^e Gk *cause my brother*

In our passage, Paul works through the divisive issue of whether people were allowed to eat meat that had been offered to an idol. Was that idolatry? In pagan towns, nearly every animal that got slaughtered was dedicated to something or another. If you were going to slaughter a goat, why not kill the goat AND please a deity? It was a no-brainer. Most gatherings had meat that had been sacrificed to some pagan god. But paganism had teeth. It was more than a weird religion that people just dropped the moment they became Christians. It was tied into their culture, their superstitions, even their structure of family and friends. There were spiritual tethers, too. Ecstatic worship, tied into their most primal of drives. It was hard to leave. People would have to struggle not to slip back into the bondage of paganism.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul resolves several of these issues with the same pattern:

1. The wrong way, which by the way, you are doing!
2. The right, “correct” way. The place “wisdom” will get you to.
3. The more excellent way of sacrificial love

He uses it as a lens to view this issue as well. It is wrong to believe in the idols. But Christians with the gift of spiritual insight know there is only one God, and the idols are powerless over God. Sacrificed meat can’t hurt someone. It has no power, and one is free as a Christian to enjoy what God has not forbidden. But for a barely-there Christian, it can throw open the door to a darker life they are desperately trying to forsake, especially if one whom he values as an example digs right in. One should give consideration to the weaker party. It may not be wrong to eat it, but to put it aside for the sake of those who could fall away because of it is truly loving. After all, just because there is no mandate in the Bible against having an alcoholic beverage every now and then, that doesn’t mean it’s OK to go around slurping a beer in front of someone struggling with the crushing grip of alcoholism.

Let’s wrap this up with a Big Idea:

Subject: How should Christians respond when they are faced with a moral issue that is neutral for themselves, but may destroy the fragile faith of another?

Complement: The mature Christian could invoke his or her Christian freedom, which would be technically correct, or could abstain out of regard for the other, which would be lovingly Christlike.

Or, to put them together:

Idea: When faced with a moral issue that is neutral for us but may disturb the fragile faith of another, we could simply invoke our freedom and be correct, or we could let go of our freedom for the benefit of others and be lovingly Christ-like.

Some parting tips on preaching from the epistles:

1. Ordinarily, one would think that most of the preaching texts in our lectionary from the epistles are from the main body of letters. A surprising amount is from the opening, exhortations, or conclusion. These fit into the themes of worship well. When preaching from the fringes of the letter, think carefully how that content relates to what goes on in the body of the letter. It will influence how you form your Idea.

2. Speaking of the lectionary, be careful with the epistle texts that come from the body of the letter as well. The compilers of the lection have a sneaky habit of trimming away the parts of your preaching text that don't fit the liturgical theme of the Sunday. Make sure your unit of scripture is complete and is really on the money for what the author wanted to accomplish.

3. One of the nice things about the epistles is that there isn't much historical distance. When Paul tells the Corinthians to stop being sexually immoral, we get the point. When he talks about food sacrificed to idols, we have to do more research. Still, epistles should be simpler to preach than other genres. They are a good place to start.

4. Greek is a more precise language than English, so the New Testament writers were able to put together long, run-on sentences that were much clearer to a Greek reader than they will be to you. Read your text in several different versions to see different ways it could be rendered.

Chapter 10

Parable

In this Chapter:

- + Understanding parables
- + Things to keep in mind when studying parables.
- + A sample parable and its Idea.

Parables are designed to make you think. Even better, they are there to force you to get beyond your usual thinking into something deeper. They are small, but pack a big punch. They present a simple image or scenario that seems easy to grab. In fact, too easy...

Later on, that little image is still scratching in your brain. Parables take something you see every day, but tweak it, making things just a bit weird. Your restless mind will know that you are missing something.

Hopefully, later, as you mull it over, it will hit you. A door in your mind will be thrown open, and you will peek through at the vista of a larger reality. It doesn't mean you will understand that reality. Most parables point to things that are beyond our understanding, yet there.

Things you should know when tackling a parable:

- 1. Parables are not truths. They point to a truth. The situation or the bright, visual image draws you in, and then something inside the parable tips you off to a greater truth.**
- 2. Some are harder than others. That's all there is to it. Some are so hard that they have defied clear interpretation, no matter whose commentary you buy. If you don't have a handle on a parable, use it for your deep prayer and meditation, not for your next sermon.**
- 3. Parables are often used by the gospel writers to draw attention to shifts and theme changes in their own manuscript. Pay attention to the context a parable is placed in.**
- 4. Parables are often grouped together. The reasons why they were grouped, plus what they have in common and not in common, are all important to learn.**
- 5. Look for that stubborn cowlick, that one odd aspect of the parable that won't lie down. The parable's meaning will be linked to it.**
- 6. Some parables are used to convey truths that listeners would immediately not want to listen to if they were told outright. Some of the themes of judgment and warning should be used carefully, remembering to develop your idea in a positive way that encourages change in the audience.**
- 7. In parables, some of the characters or images represent something. Some don't. It will drive you batty trying to figure out which do and which don't. But that is the intellectual exercise the parable was written to cause!**

A sample parable to study: Luke 13:6-9 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”³

The context for this passage is plain to see. It is used as an illustration after Jesus had just proclaimed the need to repent, or perish. So we know that repentance is going to be part of the subject.

The parable is about an unproductive fig tree hogging up good ground in a vineyard. Research shows that the vineyard is a classic symbol of Israel. The owner (God) checked for fruit, found none, and told his gardener (Christ) to cut it down. The gardener asked for another year, where may do all in his power to nourish the tree. If it failed to product fruit, then it could be cut down.

Since we know the emphasis is on repentance, we assume that Jesus is declaring his coming as the creation of a final opportunity for repentance and salvation. But it will not last forever. Let’s see if we can get that into a Big Idea:

Subject: Why should we respond to God without delay?

Complement: We should respond to God because we have been graciously given a second chance for fruitful life, but that window of opportunity is only temporary.

Parables have an amazing array of messages. Open your eyes and your mind, and get ready to see God’s Word come alive!

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville

Chapter 11

Proverbs

In this Chapter:

- + The function of proverbs.
- + Common themes.
- + Building a sermon on a proverb.
- + Additional advice on preaching proverbs.

Up the proverbial creek:

We live in a culture saturated by zingers, one-liners, and sayings. Proverbs are everywhere! They are short, memorable, and they compete with each other for a hearing in our noisy public life. “A penny saved is a penny earned,” is shouted down by, “The one who dies with the most toys, wins.” Each one attempts to instill or challenge a value, but it is up to us to decide what to do with them.

Proverbs are not absolute truths. They may be general, but they are not universal. Using everyday images and situations, they point out the common threads that weave through our experience. But, to repeat, they are not universal. A proverb does not apply in all times and situations. As we reflect on a proverb, we need to ask ourselves questions like, “In what situations does this apply? Where does this *not* apply?” Proverbs are not just self-contained wisdom; proverbs *require* wisdom. They offer wisdom and demand it back. But even better, because they are packed in familiar, often amusing images, they leapfrog right over our defenses, and hit us where we live. Proverbs are the ancestors of the parable.

If you go through the Book of Proverbs carefully, you will see this in action. In places, proverbs that seem to totally contradict each other will be paired together, such as 26:4.5:

“Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself”

“Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.”

Looking carefully at each in turn, you can see that they each point out a common experience. Most of us have tried to stop someone from doing something we knew was stupid and only wound up inadvertently causing so much trouble we wish we hadn't bothered. Other times, a loved one has gone down a road to disaster while those around them watched in silence. Try to toe the line between giving good advice and respecting another's private freedoms, and you are as likely to be asked “Why didn't you warn me?” as “Why do you always butt in?” Life is complicated after all!

Laying some groundwork.

Since life is so complicated, proverbs will always be a precious part of God's Word for preaching. But they are a unique form, and if we play by their rules, we find a well-marked trail to the Big Idea, and to a message. Let's get acquainted with the proverb family.

Not all proverbs are found in the Book of Proverbs. They also are in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Even some of Jesus' teachings are proverbial in form. However, since Jesus' sayings are so relative to the gospel context, it is best to treat them as part of the narrative. Proverbs come in two basic varieties, those that create order, and those that subvert it. Nearly all in the Book of Proverbs establish order, and likewise those in Ecclesiastes subvert or overturn it.

Leave Ecclesiastes aside for now, and focus on the Book of Proverbs. Once you get a handle on preaching proverbs, Ecclesiastes jumps on board. When we say that these proverbs create order, what does that mean?

When we say that proverbs establish order, we mean that they build lay down patterns for healthy relationships among the people of God. Although many are particular to their time frame, the principles they lift up apply to us all. Here are the broad categories you will come across in Proverbs:¹

1. Respect for the aged and wise.
2. Moderation in food and drink.
3. Avoiding sexual immorality.
4. Caring for and respecting the poor.

5. Guarding one's tongue.

6. Healthy work habits.

How do you go about writing a sermon on a proverb?

First, study your proverb in several versions. Research any images it presents with a good Bible dictionary. Check out any cross references, to see if the image has a "holy meaning" elsewhere in the Bible. Check out a commentary to see if you have a proverb that is part of a larger grouping. If so, use the whole unit.

Next, figure out the type of proverb you have. Each type works a bit differently to make its point. Here is a list:²

1. Equational proverbs: These relate one thing to another in a meaningful way. Sounds like a Big Idea! This=That. There are four kinds of equational proverbs:

A. Synonymous. These pop up most often in Proverbs chapters 16 through 22. It restates in a powerful, meaningful way, often introducing the second line with "for" or "and."

B. Comparative. These often use "like" or "as." Most are in chapters 25 and 26.

C. Elaborative: The second part builds on the first, making it more intense.

D. Q&A. It asks a question, then answers it.

2. Oppositional proverbs: Rather than comparing two things, these contrast two things, often using "but" or "better than..." If you can figure out the underlying reason *why* one thing is ranked above another, that is the basis of your Idea.

Now that you have tinkered with your proverb, and know how it works, you can build your idea. What is the larger principle at work? How does it relate to the general themes mentioned earlier? ask yourself, "What is it about human beings that makes this proverb necessary? What are the situations where we neglect this?"

Time for a sample.

Take Proverbs 27:14, "If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse." (NIV)

¹ McKenzie, Alyce M. Preaching Proverbs: Wisdom from the Pulpit. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. (page 11)

² Mackenze, (page 38)

This is an oppositional proverb. “Blessing” and “curse” are contrasted. But what makes them different? A blessing is offered, but a curse is received. So what?

This is what makes proverbs so wonderfully human. Imagine the scenario: Two neighbors, whether in ancient Jerusalem or modern Peoria, are stumbling blearily out of their front doors in that draggy pre-dawn hour on their way to a long day of work. Suddenly, like fingernails on a blackboard, is a gratingly loud, “Hey! God Bless You!”

Dogs bark. Sleep-sticky eyes inside the house open. A baby is jolted awake, and begins to wail. Can you see it?

You can imagine how easily even the holiest of words are soiled by how they are used. To bellow a blessing to the barely awake is in poor taste and in poor timing. It smacks of puffy-fake religion. So, now we craft our idea:

Idea: Your words are not only received based upon what you say, but upon when you say them, the manner you say them, and the hidden motive behind you saying them.

That will preach! Your job after the idea is to imagine scenarios in life where this idea will fit. Can you think of a time when words were spoken with awful timing? Can you think of a time when someone offered oh-so-holy wisdom that smacked of insincerity and ulterior motive?

If you can prepare a message outline that introduces such a scene, brings in the proverb, shows how the details support the idea, and then applies it to new situations, you have your proverb sermon!

Some parting tips on proverbs:

1. Remember that Proverbs assume a steady world order, where religion touches all areas of life. Ecclesiastes is the flip side. They show how standard patterns crash and burn, driving us to a deeper truth.

2. There are proverbs hiding in there like bad food in the back of the fridge; no longer safely edible. Proverbs that deal with beating children or slave/master relationships are often too painful for public use, and are best left to careful group Bible study.

3. Your goal in studying proverbs is to think of real, concrete situations for which the principle behind the proverb applies. But also put down some where the proverb does *not* apply!
4. Preaching a proverb is a fantastic way to develop your skills as a storyteller, since you don't have to spend much time explaining the text.
5. When you read your Scripture Lesson before the message, have the proverb in several versions. Read each in turn, announcing the version first. This will reinforce the proverb a few times, and will make the Scripture Lesson lively and long enough.
6. Church folks love to see a good proverb brought to vivid life. Enjoy!

Chapter 12

Law/Code

In this Chapter:

- + Understanding the Law.
- + Common themes from the Law.
- + Getting the Idea of a Law passage.
- + Additional advice on preaching from the Law.

Are rules made to be broken?

No...rules are made when they are *being* broken. Laws correct abuses to freedom. They define how we will live together. Even more than that, laws establish whom we are as a nation. If someone asked, "What makes America unique?" a good answer may be "Our Laws and freedom." We have chosen to live a certain way, one which (ideally) prevents tyranny and ensures opportunity.

The Jewish people were defined by the Law. It was a system given by God, based upon a faithful relationship with God, mutual accountability, and their completely unique identity as God's people.

Sometimes the rules you may read in the Old Testament Law seem extreme. But imagine if you took a tour of a nuclear power plant. Picture the workers moving about with careful precision in their odd, sterile outfits. Warning placards on every wall. Precise protocols observed every day. All these rules would be useless across town in the ballpark. But in here, they make sense, because somewhere in that structure, carefully contained, thrums an object of enormous power.

God, in grace, had chosen to redeem the people of Israel from slavery and bring them to a new land. They were to be set apart, never to be dissolved in the tidal wash of nations, and carefully preserved to be a light to the nations, bearers of the glorious presence of God. They were to offer witness

to the one true God, and from them would arise the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Can you think of anything more powerful than that?

This Law, then, was a big deal. It defined them on the outside, but also reflected the values they embraced on the inside. Remember, “Holy” literally means “set-apart.” The Law established the Jewish nation as God’s covenant people. They were to separate themselves from the surrounding nations, who were to be considered as under judgment. Remember that, for far longer than American Constitution has been around, the Jewish people have had the Torah! It deserves our deepest respect.

Some common themes in the Law:¹

Let’s give away most of the starter-sentences for your sermon Idea. But don’t get too excited. Nothing written below is an Idea. It is the meaningful connection that makes an Idea. You will need to know why, or how, or in what situations, these themes are true before you can craft an Idea.

1. Religious life is completely tied to civil and family life. Worship defines us.
2. People’s lives are more important than property.
3. We have to go out of our way to make sure the most vulnerable are protected: the poor, resident aliens, servants/slaves, widows.
4. God’s people must be different than the others/nations around them.
5. Everyone is accountable, even the rich.
6. Your inner thoughts and desires are just as accountable to God as your actions.
7. Revenge can’t go unchecked.
8. Since the physical, the social and the spiritual are all interrelated, what we do with our bodies and homes matters. Hygiene and holiness are closely tied ways to survive and thrive!
9. God is the ultimate provider of all we depend upon and enjoy.

¹ Diduit, Michael, ed. The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching. Nashville: Broadman, 1992. (page 272)

Take a look at your text:

Even though there are general themes to work with, you still have to hoof it on the research. Look at the structure of your Law passage. Is it a rule dropped from above (do this, don't do that)? Or is a guideline on how to deal with something (If A does this, then B should...)?

Look for parallels and common patterns. A good amount of research with some quality commentaries may draw your attention where it needs to go. For example, in the depths of Leviticus are the instructions for what to do if one's house is infested by mold. They knew how toxic that stuff could be even back then. A closer look reveals that the pattern for cleansing and the process for getting a priestly "all clear" were the same for both moldy houses and leprous bodies. Mold was considered leprosy of the house. Our bodies, our faith, and our environment all work together. It expresses theme #8.

Which of the themes are expressed in your text? Why is it true? How does it "play out?" Which aspect of being god's unique, covenant people is being expressed?

A Holy example:

Let's run through an example that's bound to open your eyes, Exodus 20:15. The text is one of the commandments: *You shall not steal.*

So, what is the subject? You? Nope. Stealing? Theft? Much more than that is needed. To say the subject is stealing is just to invite a rambling bunch of your own thoughts on theft. But we are called to preach the Bible's ideas, not our own. Even a subject like, "Is stealing the right thing to do?" doesn't get to the heart of it. Besides, that is a yes-no kind of question.

That's why we do research, why we really look at the text in its context. We have to look up things like covenants, and what the word for "steal" meant to the writer, not just to us. What was at stake if they did steal? Why would God forbid it? What did it mean in an age where whole tribes and nations supported themselves by stealing land, laborers, and livestock? *You shall not steal.*

Now we get closer. Let the subject question really define what this passage is talking about. Perhaps something like this:

What is God's desire for how God's covenant people treat the possessions of others?

Or maybe this:

How does stealing disrupt the relationship God intended us to have with Himself and with those around us?

In this case, the truths expressed in the context of the rest of God's law, and the major themes applied to property and theft, give us a complement like this:

Stealing disrupts our relationship with God because it tears away our unique identity as a holy child of God, because it fails to protect the poor by tearing away someone's means of survival, and because it tears apart our dependence upon God as our provider, taking that which God has not allowed.

There is plenty of room for condensing and revision in that idea statement. But the basics are in place. That will preach!

Some parting tips on preaching the law:

1. In many cases, the historical distance between our world and theirs is so great that only the principle of the law applies.
2. As Christians, we are not bound by the ceremonial law. Although the principles of the law still apply to us, we are not required to eat kosher or observe the sacrificial system.
3. The sacrificial system does, however, foreshadow the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Although the sacrifices of ancient Judaism did not ultimately atone for sin, they banked upon God's gracious promise to do it. But Jesus made it work. There are patterns of redemption in the OT Law that can be used to powerfully preach the Gospel...if you can find them and use them well.
4. Stick to the general principles of the Law. Most of your ideas will convey one of the themes mentioned in this chapter.
5. Keep your sermon in the 21st century as much as possible. Only delve into the ancient world for the precious few moments you need to explain the mechanics of your preaching text. Every minute you tarry in the 9th century B.C., you are losing the attention of your audience right and left. Keep your illustrations focused on real-life situations and relationships. God's Law is gloriously alive!

Chapter 13

Prophets

In this Chapter:

- + Understanding the prophets.
- + The basic styles or types of prophesy.
- + Getting the main idea from a prophetic passage.
- + A sample study passage from the prophets.
- + Additional advice on preaching from the prophets.

The bonus of prophet-sharing:

Remember the old, clunky TV sets that used to last for decades? Forget the hi-def and plasma screens. When the old ones got out of focus, sometimes all it took was a fearless family member who was willing to step up and give a well-placed whack. The impact seemed to startle the contraption back into a clear, stable picture...for a little while.

So go the prophets. They pack a mighty wallop. With jaw-dropping imagery, bold lines of poetry, and high drama, they shook their audience awake to a far deeper reality. The prophets didn't balk at stringing puns like pearls, or singing funeral dirges about those who were still alive. Anything was worth it, for the God they heralded is of ultimate worth.

Got a text from the prophets? Get ready for a blessed challenge.

First things first. Determine what type of prophetic text you have before you:

1. Accounts: Accounts are stories. Many of the passages that seem to look like stories in the prophets are actually just part of the prophecy. They just give the settings and responses. But there are some sections that are complete stories, and should be treated as such. Isaiah 36-37 is an example. So is a lot of the latter half of Jeremiah. Some of the stories can be long, and you will need to read them until you can see the beginning and end.

If you have an account as your preaching passage, then it is a story. Go ahead over to the chapter on narrative, but keep the section “Common Themes of the Prophets” from this chapter handy. It will help narrow your way to the Big Idea.

2. Call to prayer or repentance from injustice or apostasy. If we flip the negative being condemned into a positive, what virtue or blessing is God seeking for his people?

3. The coming kingdom/Day of the Lord. Is there a particular facet of the kingdom being lifted up, and what needed change does that relate to in the audience?

4. Lawsuits: Courtroom scenarios get played out occasionally in the prophets. Make sure you know who are the defendants, judge, and prosecutor. God does not always play the judge!

5. Speech: One of the most common forms of prophetic writing. In every speech, the prophet, in light of God’s sovereignty, either criticizing something or encouraging something. Once you know what that is, you are on your way to the big idea. Most speeches are in poetic form, so once you read the sections below, jump to the poetry chapter.

6. Funeral dirge: This is a song of lament and woe. It has a special meter in the Hebrew so the folks back then could recognize it. Today, a good commentary will reveal a dirge in progress. Look for tight, shortened lines filled with sad finality.

Rely on the helps in other genres as much as you can with the prophets. Go to poetry if you see the passage is in verse. But remember that most of what you are seeking will fall into one of the categories listed below, so keep the next page bookmarked!

Common themes from the Prophets:

1. Violation of the covenant relationship that God has with his people.
2. Injustice or oppression.
3. Rise and fall of nations. The critical issue is why God is judging, and how each nation is being used to achieve the purposes of God. The prophets are not shy about the whys.
4. Idolatry.
5. Judgment or restoration of Israel/Judah.

As you can see, these are all serious matters, and well worth getting our attention. The prophets clamored for attention because the very consciousness of their people needed to be shaken awake to the immanence of God. In every message, what God is doing needs to be illumined by why God is doing it. God's actions reveal God's desire. We can preach God's desires for his people to any age.

Discerning your text's Idea:

Pay careful attention to the historical setting. Who exactly is involved? What is the situation? And what is God's response? What does the way God responded tell us about God's nature, God's way of engaging this world? What special literary devices does the prophet use to make his point? What does that choice say about the tone and meaning of the text?

Take a look at Obadiah 1:10-15 (NRSV)

¹⁰For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob,

shame shall cover you,

and you shall be cut off forever.

¹¹On the day that you stood aside,

on the day that strangers carried off his wealth,

and foreigners entered his gates

and cast lots for Jerusalem,
 you too were like one of them.

¹² But you should not have gloated^c over^d your brother
 on the day of his misfortune;
 you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah
 on the day of their ruin;
 you should not have boasted
 on the day of distress.

¹³ You should not have entered the gate of my people
 on the day of their calamity;
 you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's^e disaster
 on the day of his calamity;
 you should not have looted his goods
 on the day of his calamity.

¹⁴ You should not have stood at the crossings
 to cut off his fugitives;
 you should not have handed over his survivors
 on the day of distress.

¹⁵ For the day of the LORD is near against all the nations.
 As you have done, it shall be done to you;
 your deeds shall return on your own head.

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version. 1996, c1989 . Thomas Nelson: Nashville*

This is a prophecy about the coming fall of the neighboring nation of Edom. In fact, it was a call for nations to band together and defeat Edom. Historically, Edom was considered to be a nation of people with a common ancestry to Israel. It goes back to the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is the ancestor of the Jewish people, while Esau was considered to founder of Edom. Two brothers who had their disagreements, expressed in two nations who also failed to get along. But Judah had recently been overrun. Since the book is so hard to date, we are not sure by whom. This passage decries, with “you should not have” in increasing intensity, Edom’s failure to help his brother nation. They stood aside and let it happen, then they gloated, then they joined in the looting, then they even cut off the escape routes and turned the fugitives back over to the conquerors! It is a progressive scale of treachery, and for that, they are judged.

Obadiah is clear that sitting idly while God’s people are ravaged, and swooping in like vultures to pick at the scraps makes Edom as bad as the enemy. God would repay Edom for what they had done.

Let’s get this into an Idea statement:

Subject: How does God address treacherous injustice done against his people?

Complement: God ensures that one receives back what was inflicted on another.

Some final hints on preaching from prophecy:

1. Watch out for shifts in voice. Pay attention to cues, such as passages that begin with “This is what the LORD says,” and close with “says the LORD.” Label the shifts in audience as well.
2. Your illustrations should be very real. Where do you see the covenant that God has with the church being violated?
3. Many of your listeners, and perhaps you as well, will be very uncomfortable talking about God’s anger, wrath, and judgment. Be careful, but don’t brush off the message. Remember, even the harshest prophecies were still designed to bring about repentance. No sense in warning those who can’t do anything about it. But the prophets are serious business, and they will remind us that thumbing our nose at God is no laughing matter.

4. Prophets need to be preached with a passion to restore people's relationships with God. The issues of prediction and fulfillment are a distant second to getting people right with God.

Chapter 14

Apocalyptic

In this Chapter:

- + What is apocalyptic and where did it come from?
- + Common threads in apocalypse.
- + Writing a sermon on apocalyptic scripture.
- + Additional advice on preaching from an apocalyptic passage.

Cheryll was the ultimate confirmation student. Eager to grow and learn, happy to be part of the church. When her class was assigned a gospel to read, she resolved to read the entire New Testament. Two weeks later, there came a knock on the Youth Minister's office door. In came Cheryll, eyes big as saucers.

She had just gotten to Revelation.

Your world just got wilder.

It was indeed a wild world that led to the rise of apocalyptic as a literary style. It came to being around 400 B.C. in the Jewish faith, and was used here and there until about 100 years after Jesus' resurrection. The Christian church used it here and there. The bulk of apocalyptic writing that survives today is not in the Bible. To make that cut, it had to be reliably tied to someone of major importance.¹

¹ Diduit, Michael, ed. The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching. Nashville: Broadman, 1992. (page 379)

If you are here, then most likely you were directed here because your text matches the apocalyptic list in Chapter 5. Either that, or you are curious, or very thorough. Let's tackle this unique genre.

At its most basic level, apocalyptic presents hope in God amidst a world order that, seems, on the surface, to be flying wildly out of even God's control. It's a literary form that has the supernatural, wild punch to embrace the collision between an awesome God and awful times.

What makes a text apocalyptic?

Here are some of the hallmarks of apocalypse:¹

1. It's dualistic...one side or the other. Good vs. evil, God vs. Satan. Pick a side; there's no middle ground.
2. It's very symbolic. And guess what? You may have to write a whole sermon without knowing what the symbols really mean. You won't be the first.
3. It moves you out of this world and into a different world, a dreamscape, a vision straight from God.
4. It deals with the end of time, the ultimate triumph of God, and the ultimate destruction of evil. Future victory re-defines our present desperation and chaos. This world shall pass away.
5. The characters are co-mingled, people and spiritual beings.
6. The plot makes the reader latch on to a single character and ride it through to victory.

Take a look at the passage in front of you:

Always begin by reading the text in several versions. The language is often choppy in apocalypse, so differing translations bring out the fullness. Keep a commentary handy, and make sure that the resources you use are mainstream. Things get out of control quickly with apocalyptic, which makes sense because no one writes apocalyptic unless things are completely out of control!

1 Diduit, Michael, ed. The Handbook of Contemporary Preaching. Nashville: Broadman, 1992. (page 379-380)

Research the answers to these questions:

What is the exact storyline? (leave the symbols as they are for the time being.) Exactly what is the flow of events?

What is the context? What do we know about the author and his audience?

What was going on that created the white-hot setting that demanded an apocalyptic response?

What are the elements or characters of the story? Which ones change?

What is the final outcome? Even if the ending is out of your text unit, it needs to be figured in.

Do your cross references. Are the elements/characters/symbols used elsewhere in the Bible? How? Do they “spin” positive or negative?

What is God doing? What does this reveal about God’s nature or intention?

Once the groundwork has been laid, you can grapple with the significance of the passage. Even if you are unsure if the text is aimed at the author’s present situation or future age, there is usually a common pattern of God at work. What is it?

Let’s try out Rev. 7:9-17 (NRSV)

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four

living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,¹² singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Looking through the passage, there are symbols in place that often get overlooked. The palm branches in verse 9, for instance. They are symbols of joy and celebration, hearkening to Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, where the ingathered harvest was celebrated. Obviously, we are already thinking a harvest-based idea. Elect from every nation gathered to God. The saints around the throne cry out a seven-fold blessing, signifying completeness. The details go on, but all start to fill in this pattern. The oppressed, persecuted people of God are brought together, purified, forever alive, and redeemed. The pain of the present age is past, they are refreshed, and God himself wipes away their tears. What a majestic vision!

Still, we have to grapple with why the passage was written. What was the author’s intent, and what is the author saying about God? This leads us to an Idea:

Subject: In the midst of the very worst of life, what are the grounds of our hope?

Complement: Our hope is in the certainty of God’s plan to draw in his people, and redeem them from trial, sin, death, and pain forever.

Some parting tips on preaching apocalyptic:

Don’t get too specific. You will not have the time to delve into such complex material. Stick to the broad strokes.

Though the Idea may be broad, apply, apply, apply. The audience will demand very concrete examples of how this theme relates to their world today.

Set aside the oddball abuses that so many inflict upon these texts. The unexplained, vivid images seem to invite bogus interpretations. Just because someone else wants to see Saddam Hussein or the United Nations in the obscure parts of Revelation does not mean you should.

Practice by preparing a message on a parable first if you are here, but overwhelmed. Parables have a lot in common with apocalyptic, and are a great place to warm up.

Remember, in the end, it is all about people's relationship with God. Apocalyptic is precious because we relate to God differently when we have that assurance of what God is doing, and will do. We all do need to be reminded of the larger framework. God is in charge!

Appendix:

Practice Exercises

Write the subject and complement of the following texts:

Dear Bishop:

When I learned about the new program of the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort, or PULSE, I had mixed feelings. I believe in the importance of recognizing and recruiting young people who may have gifts for ministry. We need it! Thank you for your part in raising awareness and creating fresh opportunities for young people to explore their call. But I have other concerns that I also believe in strongly. I believe we need to ask ourselves, "Are we inviting them into a system that is set up to drive them away?" Think about how uncertain of a career choice the ministry is. We can plan a big rally to say, "We want you," but the truth is, we don't say with any commitment that we want them until many difficult, expensive years later. Many young, gifted, and faithful people want to follow God's call, but they need jobs! They will have families to support, student loans to pay, and new lives to begin. They need full-time salaries with good health coverage. They need housing that provides the space, upkeep, and privacy that lives up the standards they were raised to embrace. They need appointments to active churches that are trained and willing to work with a young, first time pastor, not first appointments to churches on the verge of closing anyway. That doesn't say, "We want you!" I have learned that the Moravian Church actually recruits gifted young people while they are still in their teens, and they interview and commit up-front to candidates before they even go to seminary. They support and mentor them continually through school and internships, and deliver that promised first church. That's a big investment, but it pays off for them with strong and long-term leaders. Young people will still have to count the cost and make sacrifices to follow God's call into ministry, but we also need to count the cost of what tough changes we need to make for it to happen.

***Sincerely in Christ,
Thoughtful Church Member***

Subject: _____

Complement: _____

Try this one:

The whispers, giggles, and milling about had just about calmed down in the little, red-carpeted sanctuary. The Lay Speaker, filling in for a vacationing pastor, tried to collect her scattered thoughts with a silent prayer, "Lord...help!" as she stepped to the pulpit. The service had gone well until five minutes ago, when Bessie Busy made her usual late sneak-in. As chance would have it, the neighbor's pug terrier had done a Sunday jailbreak from the yard, and with a snort and skittering toenails, came barreling between Bessie's ankles, through the open door, and right up the center aisle. Kids laughed and ran to pet the homely intruder, while the allergic sneezed, and the ushers formed an ad hoc corner-the-pug brigade. After a few minutes of comic chaos, the bulgy-eyed bandit was carried out the door and returned to its blushing owner. The Lay-Speaker, nervous enough already, with a de-railed service to get back on track, suddenly laughed. Bingo! Still grinning, she stepped forward and said, "Folks, we just got a real-life example of how one small thing that doesn't belong can wreak havoc in a worship service. I'm glad, because I'm here today to share God's word about some much bigger, meaner things that may very well be wreaking havoc in our Christian lives. But they don't have to! Let's turn to Colossians, chapter 3, and see what they are..."

Subject: _____

Complement: _____

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VITA

Robert “Bob” Milsom, born March 2, 1971, has served as an ordained minister for twelve years in the United Methodist Church, currently in his fourth year serving a local church in Cornwall, New York. Prior to Cornwall, he had been appointed as a pastor to United Methodist Churches in Kearny, New Jersey, and Alpine, New Jersey. He has been married for 12 years to his wife, Lesa, and they have three children.

Rev. Milsom received a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Honors in English from the College of New Jersey, in 1989. He attended both Asbury Theological Seminary and Drew Theological Seminary, completing a Masters of Divinity Degree at Drew in 1998. He began his Doctor of Ministry coursework at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in January of 2002, and upon completion of this project in May, 2007, he enrolled in a Masters of Communication program at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York.

During his years of ministry, Robert Milsom has actively participated in the nurture of candidates for pastoral ministry. He serves as a supervising pastor for seminary interns, is a member of his District’s Committee on Ordained Ministry, which oversees candidates in the process of entering Christian ministry, and serves several as a mentor.

At the heart of Bob’s ministry is a passion for preaching, and for instilling the wonderful discipline of proclaiming the word of God to each new generation. He is a leader in the coordination of his area’s Lay Speaker training program, and serves as a preaching instructor.

